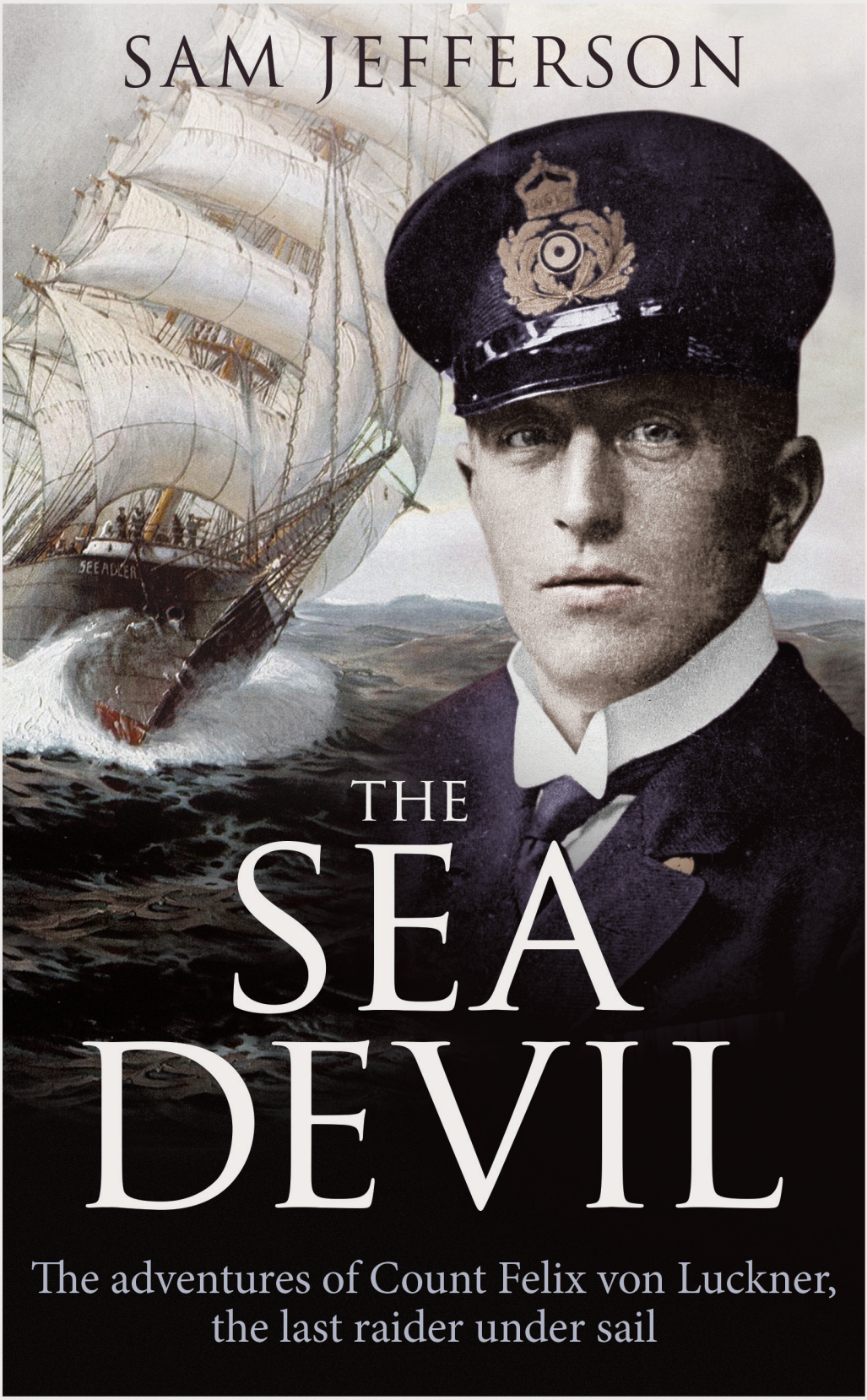
SAM JEFFERSON




# THE SEA DEVIL

The adventures of Count Felix von Luckner, the last raider under sail

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# INTRODUCTION: POST TRUTH

Forgive me, comrade; how could you be my enemy?
If we threw away these rifles and this uniform you
could be my brother.

ERICH MARIA REMARQUE, *ALL QUIET ON THE WESTERN FRONT*

In early December 1916, an unassuming windjammer lies at peace in a tranquil anchorage off the island of Sylt in northern Germany. In the crisp winter light, the backdrop of pine-clad shores and sands glows white. The old tall ship swings in a leisurely way with the tide in a state of near perfect equanimity, as if contentedly taking in the scenery. For three weeks she is moored there while the days unfurl and roll by; short winter days a jumble of dark clouds and storms, punctuated by crystalline bursts of beauty and blood red sunsets. All is peaceful aboard and the ship only occasionally twitches and plucks at her anchor chain as if to remind her master that she is ready and willing to get away.

Europe may have been enveloped by the cloud of one of the darkest, bloodiest, cruellest conflicts the world has ever witnessed, but it doesn't seem to have reached this corner of the North Sea. Conflict, urgency, even time itself seem to bypass the sleepy ship as she keeps her lonely vigil in that forgotten backwater. Waiting. Then, at dawn on 17 December, in the face of a freshening breeze, she gets underway.

Suddenly, all is action, and, high up in the rigging, sailors loose the sails to the wind. Far below on the deck, the sails are sheeted home, while the remainder of the crew slowly tramp around the capstan bringing the anchor chain chinking to the surface link by link. As the sails belly to the breeze, the windjammer heels and trembles slightly – a tiny shuddering thrill. She is alive once more.

Her decks are loaded high with a cargo of fragrant pine and she looks for all the world like a harmless trading vessel – just another elegant, slightly battered remnant of a dying breed. Yet there is more to this old sailing ship than meets the eye. Although she flies the neutral flag of Norway, she's actually part of the German Imperial Navy, and beneath her decks lie 32 machine guns, two four-inch guns, grenades, dynamite and a crew of highly trained German naval officers and sailors. The truth is that she is a raider, and her mission is simple: search and destroy. With the conflict at sea reaching its cruellest and most brutal phase, this raider faces the daunting prospect of trying to break through the British blockade of the North Sea – one of the most effective chokeholds any nation has inflicted on another. If she succeeds, she will then be free to carry out her orders: to sink as much Allied shipping as possible. This is SMS *Seeadler*, the last true warship to operate under sail. The last corsair.

The *Seeadler*'s commander, Felix Graf von Luckner, was a dynamic nobleman possessed of courage to the point of recklessness. He had always been a man with a roving disposition and a habit of getting involved in unlikely adventures. As he gazed out at the German coastline slipping by on that cold December day, he may have already had an inkling that his greatest adventure lay before him – just over that horizon. For, as his ship gathered way and the land slowly receded, the *Seeadler* was on her way to writing her

own very strange chapter in the history of World War I: during an epic and often surreal voyage, she succeeded in causing great harm to Allied shipping – all achieved with the supposed handicap of being a sailing ship pitched against steamships. This alone was a fine achievement that undoubtedly did much to demoralise the Allied cause. Yet, what could not have been clear to any military strategist was that, when the *Seeadler* headed out from Sylt that December day, she carried an even more effective weapon than her guns or grenades. She brought something to the war that had been almost totally lacking up to that point: humanity and charisma. It was perhaps these basic commodities that were most damaging to the Allied cause.

The most potent salvo this raider would deliver was upon the Allied propaganda machine. It is often said that in wartime, truth is the first casualty, and, by late 1916, when the *Seeadler* set out on her unlikely mission, Germany was certainly feeling it: ever since the outbreak of war, on 28 June 1914, it had been bludgeoned by one of the most effective propaganda campaigns the world had ever witnessed.[1]

Facts at times seemed rather passé as the Allies sought to use any means possible to paint the Germans in the worst light possible. Even if smear campaigns were accepted as an inevitable by-product of war, the flagrant disregard for news with any basis in fact was often astonishing. Thus in the early stages of the war, the public was variously informed that German soldiers in Belgium had kept up their spirits by chopping off the hands of babies and that, when this became repetitive, they took to amputating women's breasts for no reason other than their own amusement. In Canada, rumours circulated that soldiers were being crucified by the Germans, while a particularly vile story was that the Germans ran a special corpse factory where the bodies of soldiers were melted down to create soap, glue and other products useful to the war effort.[2]

Needless to say, none of these 'facts' was true, but it didn't matter. As far as the Allies were concerned, the most important thing was to whip up as much anti-German sentiment as possible. War needs to be fuelled by hatred. Fear and loathing are inevitably the focal point of any conflict, and few wars needed a focal point more than World War I. Even with the benefit of hindsight, it is still very hard to establish what the conflict was truly about, never mind who was wrong or right. The result was a fierce propaganda campaign from both sides, as each desperately sought to portray their cause as the just and fair one. By 1916, it was clear there was only one winner on this front, and it was the Allies.

Germany hadn't helped itself: its Zeppelin air raid attacks – launched by the German Imperial Navy on British towns and cities – were designed to damage British morale, but they also provided prime material for propagandists. On 16 December 1914, German Zeppelins bombed Scarborough, claiming 137 lives, including that of a 14-month-old baby. Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty, reacted with delight, stating, 'Whatever feats of arms the German navy may hereafter perform, the stigma of the baby-killers of Scarborough will brand its officers and men while sailors sail the seas.'[3]

He was right. For the remainder of the war, the Germans were frequently labelled 'baby-killers', while 'Remember Scarborough' became a rallying cry for the British troops. In modern terms, it was PR disaster.

The next huge blunder came at sea. From the beginning of the war, Germany had been cornered by the British blockade, which utilised Britain's naval supremacy to cut off all supply lines to Germany from the Atlantic. It was a chokehold that the British never eased for a moment, despite the fact that it was widely recognised as being illegal, contravening treaties that Britain had been instrumental in drawing up regarding the

basic rules of war. This 'starvation blockade' is often viewed as one of the first great war crimes of the twentieth century, and it claimed an estimated 800,000 lives through starvation and malnutrition.[4]

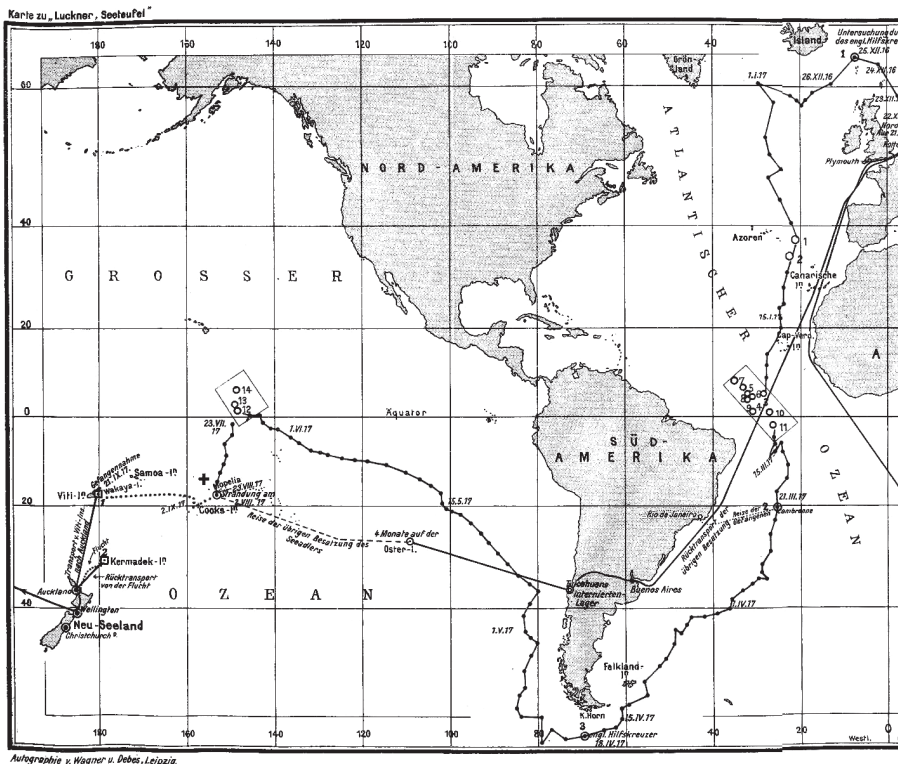
Writhing within this vice-like grip, the Germans retaliated with 'unrestricted submarine warfare', which meant that U-boats ignored 'prize rules' (which dictated that U-boats and Allied submarines surface and give vessels time to evacuate before they were torpedoed) and instead sank any Allied vessel without prior warning. This method of menacing shipping reached its nadir on 7 May 1915, when RMS *Lusitania*, one of the largest, fastest and most prestigious transatlantic liners in the world, was sunk without warning by a U-boat, U-20, as she approached Ireland. She sank in 18 minutes, claiming 1,198 lives.

There are all sorts of conspiracy theories surrounding this sinking. Some believed that it was a deliberate attempt by the British to lure the Americans into the conflict. Yet the fact remains that, although the *Lusitania* was carrying some ammunition in her cargo, and inexplicably steamed into a danger zone without taking any evasive action, the resulting loss of civilian life was horrifying and seemed to confirm everything the public had been told about the vile enemy. As Winston Churchill reflected at the time, 'In spite of all its horror, we must regard the sinking of the *Lusitania* as an event most important and favourable to the Allies … The poor babies who perished in the ocean struck a blow at German power more deadly than could have been achieved by the sacrifice of 100,000 men.'[5]

Such actions helped to form the view of Germans as cold, hard, inhuman 'Huns' – a view that was hugely valuable to the Allied cause. It's a perception – reinforced by World War II – that the nation still arguably struggles with to this day. During World War I, the depth of feeling stirred up was often so hysterical as to seem absurd. In his autobiography, *A Sort*

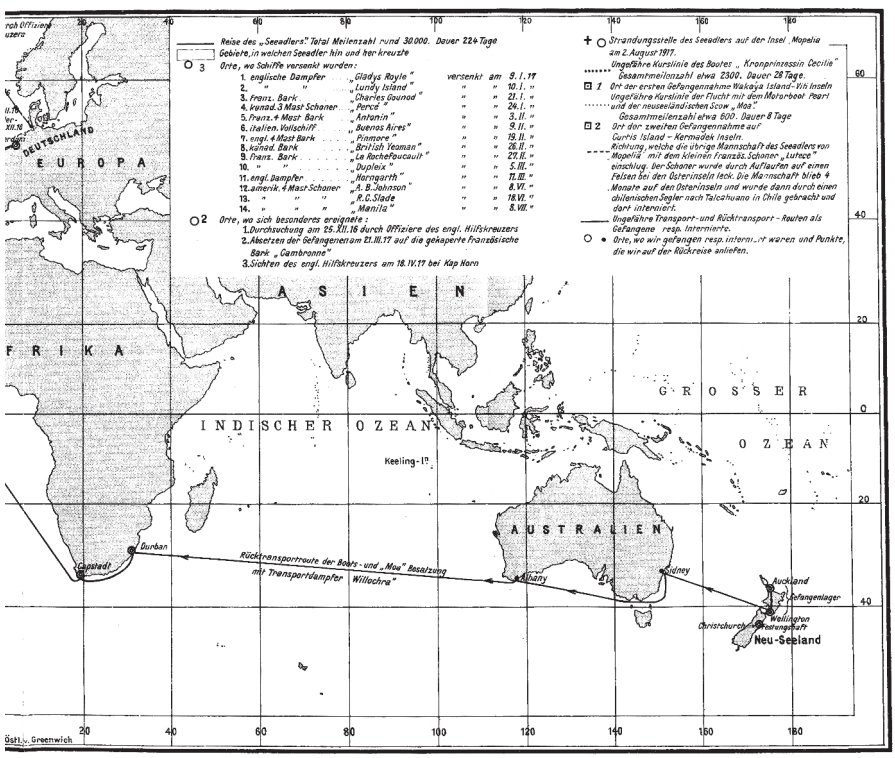
*of Life*, the novelist Graham Greene recalls a dachshund being stoned in the streets.[6] Such was the antipathy that, in 1917, one prominent Anglo-German family – the Saxe-Coburg Gothas – decided it might be politic to change their name to the more wholesome 'Windsor'. Meanwhile, in America, there were several instances of mob violence against German immigrants, including the sickening lynching of the German-American Robert Prager in Maryville, Illinois.[7] Such an incident was an example of the Allied propaganda machine running out of control, yet it illustrates just how effective it was – a vital tool in successful conscription during a bloody war – and Germany seemed to have no answer. That was, however, until Felix Graf von Luckner and the *Seeadler* appeared on the scene.

Putting aside the obvious romance of being the last sailing ship to be a truly effective weapon of war, there was something else about the



*Seadler*'s campaign on Allied shipping that caught the eye – and it was down to her commander. Von Luckner proved himself to be a nobleman in more ways than one. In a campaign spanning two oceans, and leading to the capture of 15 Allied vessels – 14 of which were destroyed – there was only one casualty. Meanwhile, the kindness shown to the victims of these attacks was so striking that it threatened to undermine the rest of the world's perception of Teutonic cruelty.

Here is the testimony of Captain Mullen, whose ship, *Pinmore*, was captured by the *Seeadler* in the mid-Atlantic: 'The count played the game throughout. He was a true sport, and treated us all fair and square.'[8] Such testimony was most damaging to the Allied propaganda machine, and there was worse to come. Take, for example, the testimony of Gladys Taylor, who was captured from a schooner in the Pacific:


Reise des „Seeadlers" Total Meilenzahl rund 30000. Dauer 224 Tage
Gebiete, in welchen Seeadler hin und her kreuzte
Orte, wo Schiffe versenkt wurden:
1. englische Dampfer „Gladys Royle" versenkt am 9.1.17
2. " " „Lundy Island" " " 10.1. "
3. franz. Bark „Charles Gounod" " " 21.1. "
4. kanad. 3 Mast-Schoner „Percé" " " 24.1. "
5. franz. 4 Mast Bark „Antonin" " " 3.II. "
6. italien. Vollschiff „Buenos Aires" " " 9.II. "
7. engl. 4 Mast Bark „Pinmore" " " 19.II. "
8. kanad. Bark „British Yeoman" " " 26.II. "
9. franz. Bark „Le Rochefoucault" " " 27.II. "
10. " " „Duplelx" " " 5.III. "
11. engl. Dampfer „Horngarth" " " 11.III. "
12. amerik. 4 Mast-Schoner „A. B. Johnson" " " 8.VI. "
13. " " " „R.C. Slade" " " 16.VI. "
14. " " " „Manila" " " 8.VII. "
Orte, wo sich besonderes ereignete:
1. Durchsuchung am 25.XII.16 durch Offiziere des engl. Hilfskreuzers
2. Absetzen der Gefangenen am 21.III.17 auf die gekaperte französische Bark „Cambronne"
3. Sichten des engl. Hilfskreuzers am 18.IV.17 bei Kap Horn
Strandungsstelle des Seeadlers auf der Insel „Mopelia" am 2. August 1917.
Ungefähre Kurslinie des Bootes „Kronprinzessin Cecilie" Gesammtmeilenzahl etwa 2300. Dauer 28 Tage.
1 Ort der ersten Gefangennahme Wakaya Island-Fiji Inseln
ungefähre Kurslinie der Flucht mit dem Motorboot Pearl und der neuseeländischen Schoner „Moa"
Gesammtmeilenzahl etwa 800. Dauer 8 Tage
2 Ort der zweiten Gefangennahme auf Curtis Island – Kermadek Inseln.
Richtung, welche die übrige Mannschaft des Seeadlers von Mopelia mit dem kleinen französ. Schooner „Lutece" einschlug. Der Schooner wurde durch Auflaufen auf einen Felsen bei den Osterinseln leck. Die Mannschaft blieb 4 Monate auf den Osterinseln und wurde dann durch einen chilenischen Segler nach Talcahuano in Chile gebracht und dort interniert.
Ungefähre Transport- und Rücktransport-Routen als Gefangene resp. Internierte.
Orte, wo wir gefangen resp. interniert waren und Punkte, die wir auf der Rückreise anliefen.
EUROPA
DEUTSCHLAND
ASIEN
AFRIKA
INDISCHER OZEAN
GROSSER OZEAN
AUSTRALIEN
Keeling-Is.
Durban
Capstadt
Albany
Sydney
Auckland
Gefangenenlager
Wellington
Festungshaft
Christchurch
Neu-Seeland
Rücktransportroute der Boots- und „Moa" Besatzung mit Transportdampfer „Willochra"
Gast v. Greenwich

'They treated me like a fairy princess. Not a word that hurt. Not a look that frightened. Not an act that worried me … from the count to the humblest sailor, their chivalry was a marvellous thing to me.' This testament was in the *Sunday Oregonian* of 1 April 1917, which led with the headline 'PRO WAR SENTIMENT SWEEPS COUNTRY'.[9]

Count von Luckner and the *Seeadler*, many miles from the Western Front and essentially living in their own private dream world, were able to bring something back to the war that had been almost entirely forgotten. Their actions demonstrated a truth that the generals on the Western Front had been trying to bury in the mud ever since the Christmas truce of 1914. Although von Luckner was a patriot who unquestionably believed in the Kaiser and the Fatherland, his exploits and actions underlined the simple, uncomfortable truth that beyond imperial struggles and the intolerable cruelty of mechanised death, the Great War was still a conflict that pitched humans against fellow humans and – at least within the confines of von Luckner's own world of the *Seeadler* – one in which humanity won out. If this was the great achievement of the voyage, another rather fortunate by-product was that von Luckner also helped to create one of the most ripping yarns you will ever read, peppered with an extraordinary catalogue of triumphs, catastrophes and farce, with one of the most compelling tales of human endurance and survival thrown into the mix.

As for the Allies, they were to pay a terrible price for their propaganda. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s their tales about the fiendish Hun were systematically exposed as lies. This meant that when Hitler started perpetrating his terrible atrocities, the stories seemed too far-fetched to be true to a jaded public who had been misled once already. Public trust had been damaged and no one knew who to believe.

# 1
# THE MUCKLE FLUGGA HUSSARS

Christmas Day in the North Atlantic, some 100 miles north of the Hebrides, and HMS *Patia*, commanded by Captain Vivian, was on patrol. Any ship passing through the North Sea was stopped to ensure that she was not transporting any goods to Germany, and the *Patia* was a fine example of the vessels used to enforce the British blockade; in peacetime, she had been a banana boat – the sort of ship favoured by the Royal Navy for requisitioning because of the requirement for speed in this trade, bananas being perishable.

The *Patia* was a key part of the Tenth Cruiser Squadron – more romantically known as the 'Muckle Flugga Hussars' – responsible for stopping and searching every merchant vessel passing through these waters and checking their papers for the destination of their cargo. By 1917, the squadron had carried out over 12,000 boardings and, by and large, it had been a thankless task. It didn't pay to think too hard about its impact either, for, as previously mentioned, the blockade of Germany, the 'war of starvation', was already claiming the lives of countless German civilians. It was just another black mark in a war that had rapidly descended into a conflict almost devoid of heroes and humanity – one characterised by death without glory and grinding, attritional, mechanical campaigns that could

permit a seaman aboard the *Patia* to be an accomplice in a horrifying war crime without even realising it.

For the men of the *Patia*, it had been a long war. The ship had spent the past three years out there on that brutal stretch of ocean, sedulously pacing back and forth over her own square of cold, grey nothingness. Waiting, always waiting, for something to happen. As sailors trod the bridge of the *Patia* and stamped their feet against the cold, they gave little thought to anything apart from doing their jobs and trying to stay warm. This was particularly true in the depths of winter when the day was little more than a brief, damp, grey smudge in seemingly eternal darkness.

The *Patia* continued her lonely vigil, zigzagging to avoid the invisible torpedoes that haunted her, while her officers scanned the sodden horizon. It was pitilessly cold: the rails were rimed with a bitter frost that clung to the hand and glowed white with the dawn light, burning with cold. Breath came in great icy billows and feet squelched icily in sodden boots that couldn't be dried. Steven Dicker, a sailor serving aboard the *Clan McNaughton*, a fellow member of the Tenth Cruiser Squadron, recalled not having dry feet for 20 days straight during a particularly stormy period.[1] Out here, the war was slowly passing them by while they meandered around their own little square of storm-tossed hell.

Yet the war manifested itself in the prickling fear sailors felt when they descended into the depths of this unarmoured ship – a trading ship prior to the war, she had been hastily converted for naval duty. Down in the bowels of the *Patia*, one could almost feel the sights of a U-boat trained on that too-thin steel plating, and waited for the explosion and inrush of water that would seal one's fate. But there was a job to get on with, even if it was Christmas Day: the word was out – another Boche raider was reported to be making a bid for freedom. All patrol vessels were on their

mettle and there was a murmur of excitement aboard the *Patia* when a ship was sighted. This momentary thrill died, however, once it was established that she was just an old sailing ship: a battered Norwegian windjammer, loaded with a great deck cargo of timber that made her look even more dishevelled; she had clearly seen better days.

Christ, she'd clearly copped a packet too: the weather had been absolutely savage the previous week and this old-timer – lines adrift, deck a shambles – had clearly seen the worst of it. She looked harmless, and the prospect of braving the cold to board and search her excited no one. Still, duty and protocol ruled aboard the *Patia*: the engine telegraph clanged and her engines thrummed with new purpose as she made a beeline for her quarry.

She swung towards the windjammer at speed, bearing down on the sailing ship at 15 knots, carving great reams of white into the grey sea. Suddenly, she was bustling with purpose; men were charging around her deck, grateful for something to do after hours of chilly inaction. The *Patia* must have been an intimidating sight as she approached the sailing ship, red pennant flying to signal that the other ship had to stop.

The gun crews had been closed up and, as the *Patia* neared, two blank shots were fired across her opponent's bows before she rounded up to windward of this unknown trader and pulled up smartly to a halt, rolling villainously in her own wake. All guns and binoculars were trained on the stranger – the *Hero*, as her name appeared – and she promptly and obediently hove-to.

Up on the bridge of the *Patia*, Lieutenant Holland eyed the windjammer with more interest than most. It was he who had been assigned to board and inspect the *Hero*. At first glance, she seemed particularly innocuous; just another big steel three-masted barque of the sort that the Glasgow

shipyards had built in their thousands in the late 1800s. A sailor inspecting her lines would have dated her circa 1880–1890. She retained a certain aesthetic elegance of the clipper ship era, harking back to a period before ships were viewed purely in utilitarian terms as machines that moved cargo from A to B. Yet she was certainly no clipper – just a humdrum cargo carrier looking particularly scruffy with all that lumber piled on deck; the deck cargo was a distinct pain, as it meant access to the lower decks was impossible at sea. If Lieutenant Holland did deem her suspicious, he'd have to make a long, tedious voyage aboard her back to Kirkwall in the Orkneys, where she would be thoroughly searched.

Presently, a boat was lowered and Lieutenant Holland, accompanied by a second officer and a signalman, were rowed briskly across the frigid waters. As they drew alongside the rust-streaked sides of the *Hero*, they were greeted by a ragtag selection of Norwegians; the captain was a youngish chap, who was chewing lugubriously on a quid of the tobacco so beloved by Norwegian sailors and bellowing at his men between times.

Once aboard, Lieutenant Holland was businesslike, but not unkind. He had been here countless times before. Besides, the Norwegians were friends to the British and the ship had clearly taken a beating. The key thing was to get this out of the way and back to the *Patia*. It was Christmas, after all, and there might even be a few brandies available in the wardroom this afternoon.

'Happy Christmas, Captain.'

'O, Happy Christmas, Mister Officer! If you come down to my cabin, you will see what a happy Christmas we have had!'

'Have you been hit by the storm?'

'Yes, we certainly have.'

'I'm sorry to hear that, Captain. We have been sheltering behind the islands. I'd like to see your papers.'

Holland is ushered down to the officers' quarters. Making his way along the deck, evidence of storm damage is everywhere: torn sails, Irish pennants fluttering in the breeze, and boarded-up port lights. Even so, Holland isn't quite ready for the chaos that greets him when he heads below. He's barely down the companionway before he's almost knocked backwards by the overwhelming stench of paraffin – the skipper mutters something about a problem with the heater. It's eye-wateringly unpleasant and it comes as some surprise to Holland as he adjusts his watering eyes to the light that, amid the sodden debris and acres of underwear that seem to be hanging to dry, there is a tall, blonde lady huddled next to the stove, her feet soaking in a tub of hot water. Oddly, she appears to be in full make-up and heavily rouged. A bandage around her jaw suggests toothache, no doubt aggravated by the infernal cold. Nevertheless, the scene is strangely homely after the clinically ordered wardroom of the *Patia*; some warmth emanates from the fire and there is music: 'It's A Long Way To Tipperary' can be heard crackling forth from the gramophone. It's hard not to feel well disposed towards the skipper, who is evidently taking such tender care of his partner.

'Your wife?' Holland ventures. 'Yes, my wife,' comes the reply. Holland has been at sea long enough to think that the lady in question is not-half-bad-looking and she stirs his chivalrous nature. Picking his way through the debris and ducking beneath the underwear, Holland extends a hand with grave formality: 'Forgive me for disturbing you, but it's our duty to do so.' 'All right,' the lady parries, rather indistinctly through her bandages.

Before Holland can continue this stimulating tête-à-tête, he's interrupted by her husband: 'What worries me are my wet papers.' 'Well, Captain, I can understand why your papers cannot be dry, you've taken on some serious water in here, that is self-evident,' replies Holland. Presently the sodden ship's papers are brought forth and Lieutenant Holland gets to work.

The bills of lading all look perfectly fine, but the log is rather unsatisfactory; Holland can accept that much of the text, even the name, has become hopelessly blurred, but there is a three-week lay-off prior to sailing that it is hard to explain away. He puts this to her captain, who appears to choke on his quid of tobacco and defers to his mate, who explains, 'Yes, we have been warned by the shipowner not to go out for the help of the German auxiliaries.' Holland is startled: 'German auxiliaries? Do you know anything about German forces?'

The captain, seemingly recovered from his choking fit, replies, 'Do you not know about the new raider *Sea Eagle*? Fifteen German submarines are also abroad, so we have heard from the shipowner. We were worried because we had a cargo bound for the British colonies. That is why we waited.'

Holland is satisfied and eager to get away. 'Captain, your papers are all right. Once I am gone, you must wait an hour before you get the signal to carry on.' This will give the wireless operator back aboard the *Patia* time to radio the details of the *Hero* back to London in order to ensure her story stacks up. Holland descends into the *Patia*'s boat and, after a slightly humiliating departure that involves scraping down the side of the *Hero* while the Norwegian captain hurls ropes and helpful advice down to them, the boat crew strikes back out to

the *Patia* with a feeling of intense relief and heartfelt hope that one day they might be warm again.

Back aboard the *Patia*, the *Hero*'s details are wired through to London. But there's a snag; *Hero* departed from Copenhagen, but the wireless office there is closed for Christmas. In confusion, the wireless operator in London simply wires back '*Hero* is all right'. The *Patia* signals to the ship that she can proceed on her course and returns to her own wearying vigil – all the while keeping an extra-sharp lookout for this new German raider – the *Sea Eagle*.

# 2
# LONE WOLVES AND BANANA BOATS

It would take five days before the Christmas Day tangle of miscommunications over the *Hero* was finally teased out and the British Admiralty was faced with the unpleasant truth that, as far as they could gather, the Norwegian ship *Hero* did not exist. Could this be another raider? The Admiralty had reason to be riled; to allow a raider of any sort to slip through the net was unacceptable, particularly with the war at sea so delicately poised.

Of course, the *Hero* (or, to give her her real name, the *Seeadler*) *was* a raider – a lone wolf sent out with the very simple remit to hunt down and destroy Allied shipping. To understand why these lone raiders were so important to the German war plan, it's important to gain an overview of the war – in particular the war at sea which, by December 1917, was entering a new and critical phase.

Talk of the war at the time was generally focused on the utter horror of what was going on in the trenches; the slow-moving, senseless, brutal trench warfare that was leaving the bodies of tens of thousands of young men strewn across the low-lying fields of northern France and Belgium

had become the defining feature of World War I with good reason. It fully introduced the world to a mechanised war where soldiers could be massacred almost by rote, victims of new and hideously efficient weapons: machine guns, gas and shells.

After war broke out on 28 July 1914, most had believed it would be finished by Christmas at the latest, expecting the conflict to be carried out in the traditional way, with troops and cavalry sweeping across the plains of France in swift, glorious attacks. The grim meat-hook reality of men crouched in sodden, mud-filled trenches and being repetitively shelled and gassed didn't fit that vision. It was a war largely without heroes: individual acts of bravery and gallantry were often simply buried amid the mud and carnage. Only the sickening death toll that this stalemate produced really caught the eye. By the time hostilities had ground to a halt on 11 November 1918, the war had claimed the lives of an estimated 17 million civilians and soldiers.[1]

By comparison, the war at sea was a far less bloody affair. Nevertheless, it was, for the most part, a similarly infuriating stalemate. Britain and Germany had been locked in a bitter arms race for a number of decades prior to the outbreak of war, and the focus of this had been the almost incomprehensible expansion of both the British and the German navies respectively. There were a number of reasons for this.

Ever since the Napoleonic wars, Britain had laid the foundations of its empire on the might and dominance of its navy. For many decades, this had seemed unassailable and, although the newly formed German state had pretensions of becoming the dominant global power, Britain had been given such a head start in the naval stakes that it seemed insurmountable. Yet, in 1906, something happened that would change everything: Britain launched the first ever Dreadnought battleship – a

brutally efficient fighting machine that could travel at 25 knots and that carried enough armament to destroy a small town from a distance of ten miles. That increased range was a key factor, as it meant a Dreadnought could destroy earlier warships in almost complete safety, being out of the range of her adversaries' guns. In fact, the Dreadnought was so far ahead of her time that she essentially rendered everything that had gone before her obsolete. In other words, she set the clock back to zero.

At a single stroke, that huge fleet that Britain possessed was rendered largely useless: if Germany had two Dreadnoughts to Britain's one, then they had the upper hand. Both countries became gripped by a sort of Dreadnought hysteria; in Britain, the slogan 'We want eight and we won't wait' was heard. As Winston Churchill, then serving as First Lord of the Admiralty, noted, 'The Admiralty had demanded six ships; the economists offered four; and we finally compromised on eight.'[2]

As the eve of World War I edged ever closer, it was clear that Britain had done enough to retain her numerical dominance. The upshot was that, after war had broken out, the Grand Fleet of the Royal Navy and the High Seas Fleet of the Imperial Navy clashed only once at Jutland, on 31 May 1916. At this point, the Germans were still hopeful that they could defeat the Royal Navy outright and sought to isolate a portion of the Grand Fleet and destroy it. The resulting chicanery culminated in a face-to-face confrontation between these two awe-inspiring fleets. The British suffered badly initially and, as a second battle cruiser exploded in the early stages of the battle, Vice Admiral Beatty was heard to exclaim that ' … there seems to be something wrong with our bloody ships today!'[3] Nevertheless, the Grand Fleet rallied and fought a rearguard action that was sufficient for the High Seas Fleet to withdraw. Both sides claimed victory and never fully engaged again.

Ultimately, Britain had lost 14 ships and a horrifying 6,094 men while Germany had lost 11 ships and 2,551 men. It would be easy to therefore view this outcome as a German victory. The problem, from a German point of view, was that it also conveyed a crushing truth: the battle had demonstrated that, at that rate of attritional loss, the High Seas Fleet would still be defeated by the Royal Navy, purely owing to its numerical advantage (Britain's Grand Fleet was 151 strong prior to the battle, while the High Seas Fleet was by comparison a modest 99). The conclusion German naval strategists drew was obvious: they could not overcome the British navy in head-to-head battles. Other tactics would need to be employed.

The failure to defeat the British at Jutland was a cruel blow for Germany. It showed very clearly that Britain still enjoyed total control of the North Sea, meaning it could continue with its 'starvation blockade' on Germany. The theory behind the starvation blockade was very simple indeed: by the outbreak of World War I, Germany's growing population was increasingly dependent on imports of food, cotton and chemicals. Before the war, most of these goods had arrived by sea from the Americas. The British plan was simple, albeit illegal: cut off the supply and starve the enemy into submission. This method contravened the Treaty of Paris, which allowed only 'direct' blockades of a port or coastline, and which Britain had signed up to in 1856. To cordon off entire swathes of ocean was prohibited. Yet World War I had rapidly become a conflict where honour and decency were overlooked. By the time *Patia* had her encounter with '*Hero*', much of the German population was in the depths of what was to become known as the 'turnip winter'; a catastrophic failure of the potato crop in 1916 had exacerbated the problem and meant that people were forced to endure outlandish delicacies such as

turnip bread in order to survive. (Prior to this, turnips had largely been used as animal feed, and the concept of subsisting on them was repellent to most Germans.) To make matters worse, coal was also at a premium and, as the icy winter bit hard and deep, many German families began to truly suffer.

Given that the High Seas Fleet had failed to break British dominance, the tourniquet around Germany had tightened and some sort of response was called for. With limited options, the only real solution seemed to be to inflict similar suffering on the British populace. Now, given that the German Imperial Navy was essentially cornered in the Frisian Islands and the Baltic, the only chance was to sneak out U-boats and lone raiders to wreak as much havoc as they could on Allied shipping.

The first part of this was the resumption of 'unrestricted submarine warfare'. This worked on the same assumption that the British were using; ergo, the entire North Sea was a battlefield and therefore anything that entered this area was fair game. Germany had employed this tactic at the start of the war with horrific results when the passenger liners *Lusitania* and *Arabic* had been sunk without warning and with great loss of life.

After the outrage in the USA following the *Lusitania*'s sinking, the Germans were sufficiently worried about the Americans joining the Allies that they backtracked on this policy, aware that they were seriously alienating neutral countries. That was, until early 1917, when they returned to the old, ruthless tactic. They knew they could not carry on fighting indefinitely and that they must act quickly and decisively if they were to win at all. The decision was therefore taken to switch back to all-out destruction – a final concentrated act of savagery to destroy the Allies

before they had time to react. It was a fateful decision, as the German Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg noted at the time, simply stating, 'Germany is finished.'[4]

Yet, at that time, there did still seem to be a chance for Germany: Britain, as an island nation, was the Germans' strongest opponent, but was also heavily dependent on imports. The hope that an intensive U-boat campaign, severing the supply line, could knock Britain out of the war in a matter of months was not entirely unrealistic. As Admiral Beatty noted, 'The real crux lies in whether we blockade the enemy to his knees, or whether he does the same to us.' Certainly, initial results of the resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare were impressively awful: between February and April 1917, U-boats sank more than 500 merchant ships, and during the second half of April of that year, an average of 13 ships per day were sunk. This was a crippling rate of destruction that – if it had continued – would have starved Britain within a matter of months. An effective convoy system would soon be introduced, in which Allied vessels travelled in groups protected by armed escorts, but at this time the devastation seemed unchecked. It was this intense savagery that finally shook America out of her neutral slumber and into the war, which she duly joined on 6 April 1917. Given her vast populace, wealth and resources, this was arguably the moment when the tide turned irrevocably against Germany – although it was not immediately obvious.

The second string of Germany's new policy was to send out raiders – ordinary vessels that had been armed – to break through the blockade and destroy as much shipping as possible. In the early phase of the war, Germany had chosen to convert some of her largest, fastest passenger liners into raiders. The record-breaking transatlantic liner

*Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse* was armed and roared around the Atlantic sinking Allied shipping.

The problem was that these big liners, in addition to being fabulously quick, were also highly conspicuous and used masses of coal. *Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse*, for example, enjoyed moderate success after blazing through the blockade. She raced down the West African coast and sank three merchant vessels before she was cornered by HMS *Highflier* while refuelling. She was destroyed after a fierce battle that concluded rather abruptly when she ran out of ammunition for her guns.

The German Admiralty decided to use subterfuge in order to gain an advantage, and moved towards a new type of raider. Unassuming merchant vessels were covertly armed and sent out to wreak destruction. The results were mixed and depended on breaking through the British blockade in the first place. The most successful of this new type of raider was the *Moewe*, which set out in 1915, slipping through the blockade by hugging the snowy peaks of the Norwegian coast. Once clear, she used the simple method of sailing under a neutral flag and approaching an enemy ship with an innocent query before running up the German flag and sinking or capturing her quarry. She sank a total of 15 ships, and even managed to get back through the blockade and return to Germany. The effect, not only on British shipping and commerce, but also on morale, was severe. Other raiders were less successful, with both the *Greif* and the *Wolf* failing to get past the blockade.

Then, in 1916, the proposal was put forward to arm a sailing ship – the logic being that such a vessel would have a better chance of breaking through the blockade. Who would honestly suspect an old windjammer? The other great Achilles heel of previous raiders had been the need to

refuel, which meant heading to a neutral port and potentially being discovered. A sailing ship could stay at sea for months – years – on end, and even then would need to touch land only briefly to put prisoners ashore and pick up supplies. The basic premise for the *Seeadler* was therefore born. Now they just needed to find a suitable vessel and, more importantly, a suitable captain.

# 3
# RUNAWAYS, COAL BAGS AND THE KAISER

Finding a suitable vessel wasn't particularly difficult. The seas were fairly awash with run-down, old tall ships (or 'windjammers') lugging their low-value cargoes across the seven seas. It also just so happened that the British Admiralty had very thoughtfully conspired to deliver a highly suitable craft right onto the doorstep of the German Imperial Navy – they'd even thrown in a prisoner of war for good measure.

The vessel in question was the *Pass of Balmaha*, an old steel ship built in Glasgow back in 1888. Tall ships are never humdrum or prosaic, but the *Pass of Balmaha* was about as run of the mill as sailing ships come. She had been constructed at a time when the Glasgow shipbuilders continued to churn out hundreds of tall ships year on year, and she was typical of her time, being designed to carry bulk cargoes over long distances with the minimum of cost.

Tall ships had lost the uneven contest with their steam counterparts almost the moment the Suez Canal opened in 1869, and from then on it was a story of slow retreat, with the great iron wind ships of the twilight of sail driven into increasingly obscure bulk-cargo/low-profit trade to

survive. This drive towards economy and efficiency was reflected in the modest sail plans and full-bodied hull lines of the *Pass of Balmaha*.

The *Balmaha* had spent most of her life lugging grain, coal and general cargoes across the seas and was described by Basil Lubbock, the great chronicler of the tall ships, as 'having a good turn of speed for a full-bodied ship'. This was well demonstrated in 1908 when, under the command of Captain Dick Lee, she made a record passage between the River Plate and Boston.[1] This was the same year that her Glaswegian owners had sold her to an American company which, despite this impressive passage, proceeded to run her on a shoestring. She was stripped of her uppermost royal yards and from then on sailed 'bald headed', as sailors put it. From an aesthetic point of view it made the *Balmaha* look hopelessly stumpy aloft, but it was a cheap, efficient rig and that was all that mattered to her owners. The romance of the clippers was long gone – all the *Balmaha* had to do was return a dividend to her owners; if she didn't, she would be sent to the shipbreaker.

The threat of the shipbreaker was an ever-present one for the dwindling fleet of tall ships that continued to tramp the oceans, increasingly haunting the high southern latitudes in their twilight years; the Roaring Forties and Screaming Fifties of the Southern Ocean – a huge, desolate wasteland of grey angry water – became a haven for the windjammers against the cruel vicissitudes of economic reality, and one that enabled them to justify their existence. Travelling this great distance of storm-battered ocean was prohibitively expensive for the steamship owner: as the miles were racked up in the coal-hungry vessel, the owner's dividend at the end of a voyage went down. But the wind was free, and a few hardy windjammers continued to eke out a living running before great gales on stormy seas. Yet, the end was in sight, and in 1914 the Panama Canal was opened, meaning that the long traverse

around Cape Horn to Peru and Chile was no longer required. With that last refuge gone, only the Australian trade was a realistic moneymaker, and even here steamships were beginning to encroach as, year on year, engines became increasingly efficient.

It seemed that the last of the commercial sailing ships would soon shuffle apologetically off the seas and into the breakers' yards. But the outbreak of war was to provide a stay of execution. There were still many thousands of sailing ships, and, as steamships were destroyed by U-boats, freights rose and demand for tonnage increased. Many an old windjammer found herself resurrected and sent back out to weather the storms of conflict.

*The Pass of Balmaha*'s fortunes were therefore modestly on the up when she set sail from New York in the summer of 1915, bound for Archangel, Russia, with a cargo of cotton. Passing across the northern tip of the blockade, she was stopped by the British and, despite the fact that she was a neutral vessel carrying a cargo to one of Britain's Allies, the officious blockader sent a crew of seven aboard and ordered the ship to divert to Kirkwall in the Orkneys for a full inspection. This was infuriating to the American skipper, Captain Scott, who pointed out that such shenanigans simply held up the delivery of a cargo that helped the war effort. His protestations went unheeded and, just to rub salt into the wounds, the British officers insisted on flying the red ensign as she headed wearily south. This proved to be an appalling error of judgement because the following morning a German U-boat surfaced. She, in turn, set about taking the *Balmaha*. With frantic haste, the Stars and Stripes were returned to the mizzen peak and the British officers concealed below. But it was too late; German suspicions had been roused and the *Balmaha* was captured. Her captain was put under armed guard and the windjammer again altered course, this time heading for Cuxhaven. On arrival, the prize crew, already

irritable after having been trapped in the hold for days on end, endured the ultimate chagrin of being unceremoniously carted off to a prisoner-of-war camp to sit out the rest of the war.

After that, the *Pass of Balmaha* was shifted to Hamburg and left to gently decay for a couple of months. It was at this point that she came to the attention of Lieutenant Alfred Kling, an Imperial Navy reservist who saw the potential of using a windjammer as a raider. The German Imperial Navy agreed: if German merchant steamers could slip through the net and go raiding, what was to stop an old windjammer doing the same? It was the perfect disguise, and the wheels were set in motion in order to make this unlikely raider ready for war. She needed a refit for sure and the decision was taken to install guns and an auxiliary engine. If all went well, it seemed that the largely prosaic *Pass of Balmaha* would end up being the last sailing ship to head out to war in earnest.

The next challenge was to line up a captain to sail her. This wasn't as easy as it first appeared, for the number of officers within the German Imperial Navy with extensive experience sailing tall ships was lacking. Many of its sailors had enjoyed a voyage or two under sail back in their youth, but they had rapidly shifted to steam and would – at best – be rusty. Lieutenant Kling had got the ball rolling on the project and was a capable sailor, but the strict hierarchy of the Imperial Navy meant that, as a reservist, he was unfortunately unsuitable. It was at this point that the name of Count Felix von Luckner started to be bandied around. He was known as a somewhat outré gent – colourful and larger than life – but he had spent a good deal of time serving on tall ships. In fact, he was always banging on about the romance of that dying breed and could be just the man for the job. He was duly summoned to Berlin.

The young man who presented himself to the Admiral in Berlin was far from your average naval officer. To be fair, he wasn't even your average human being. He was 36 but had already fitted enough adventure into his life to fill what would have to be viewed as a rather fanciful travelogue. Von Luckner was of noble stock and his family had an impressive pedigree when it came to military service. His great-grandfather, Nicolaus von Luckner, had risen to prominence during the Seven Years' War, which had started in 1756.

Nicolaus' parents had decided he was to be a monk, but the youngster ran away from monastic school at the age of 13 to fight for the Turks in their conflict with the Austrians. He later switched sides and became an officer in the Prussian army. He then decided to become a soldier of fortune, forming his own private cavalry force known as Count Luckner's Hussars, which were to prove a hugely influential and lethal unit of mercenaries. After its huge success in the Seven Years' War, the King of Hanover offered to buy von Luckner's unit and a purchase was agreed, with the proviso that its name be retained. Unfortunately, the King went back on his word and, as a result, the fiery von Luckner swore to fight against his erstwhile employer. He joined the French army and continued to flourish.

When revolution broke out in 1789, von Luckner opted to back the revolutionary forces and became commander of the Army of the Rhine, a force dedicated to protecting the new republic from the threat of invasion along its borders. Here again, von Luckner served with distinction, and the song 'Chant de guerre pour l'armée du Rhin' – better known as 'La Marseillaise' – was dedicated to him. Following a number of successes in the field, Nicolaus was given the title of Marshal of France. Inevitably, despite these triumphs, von Luckner met his fate at the blade of the

guillotine in 1794. It didn't help that he had gone to Paris to demand the back pay owed to himself and his soldiers. The fact that he was a foreigner and a nobleman provided an ideal pretext for execution.

To return to Nicolaus's grandson, Felix: with such blue blood coursing through his veins it was natural that a glittering career in the cavalry should beckon. Yet, from an early age, it was clear that Felix was marked out to walk a different path. He struggled with his studies and gained a reputation as a daredevil and a dreamer. His despairing father often noted that there was 'something of the devil in him', but he didn't have to despair for very long since, at the age of 13, Felix ran away from home.

'It was school I was really running away from,' von Luckner later recalled. 'School was a horrid institution and, as far as I was concerned, its abolition would solve all my problems. In addition, I wanted to be a sailor and go to America and visit my hero Buffalo Bill.'[2] These were all perfectly laudable aspirations, but when your parents are among the highest-ranking nobles in Germany, things are a little trickier. However, Felix succeeded in escaping to Hamburg, where he assumed the name Phelax Leudicke and, under these false colours, secured a berth as cabin boy – unpaid – aboard the Russian tall ship *Niobe*, bound for Australia. The *Niobe* was a hard ship and, being a German among Russians, Felix was not a popular crew member. He was given the dual roles of cleaning out the latrines and mucking out the pigsty. It was about as tough an introduction to the sea as anyone could imagine.

*The 'romance of the sea' business was cut short with a knife, von Luckner relates: 'It was aboard the Niobe and a good many other sailing ships that I got to know the real world and learned my job.*

*In cleaning the sty, I was not allowed to let the pigs out. I had to go in there with them and they were very narrow quarters. The unspeakably dirty animals rubbed against me constantly while I laboured with pail and brush. The sewage was so deep that it filled my shoes. I had only two pairs of trousers. Soap and water were not to be wasted. I grew filthier than the pigs.*

*Everyone kicked me because I looked like a pig and smelled like one. They called me 'Pig'. For food, I had to go around and eat what the sailors left on their plates. They said that was the way that pigs were fed. For breakfast, instead of coffee and rolls, there was vodka with stale bread to soak in it. I got the leavings of this …*[3]

So von Luckner goes on, and it is hard not to imagine this as a fanciful hard-luck story commensurate with the expectations of someone born with a silver spoon in their mouth – a silver spoon that has been suddenly and traumatically removed. Sadly, there are enough stories of this type from the last years of sail to suggest that it is an all-too-accurate depiction of just how hard life was aboard these great steel windjammers. Hunger, hardship and extreme danger were never far below the horizon, and it was not just the sea that was capable of dishing out intolerable cruelty.

The sea was still the ultimate adversary, however, as Felix discovered shortly after rounding the Cape of Good Hope. Despite the frankly awful treatment dished out aboard, he still harboured ambitions of being a sailor and took to climbing the rigging in order to improve his seafaring skills. No doubt it also helped that, up here, he was a safe distance from those wretched pigs. It was this propensity for escaping into the rigging, however, that was almost his undoing. He was out helping to set the topsail following a spell of bad weather when he was caught by a great

slab of canvas ballooning in the wind and solid as a steel sheet, which knocked him off the yard and sent him tumbling into the sea. He was fortunate that he did not fall to the deck for the impact would almost certainly have killed him. As it was, it seemed likely that he faced a longer wait for death out in the open water.

Back aboard the *Niobe*, however, things were happening rapidly. The helmsman turned the ship into the wind and hove her to, a lifebelt was thrown overboard and volunteers were sought to man the lifeboat. The captain, hearing the commotion of thundering sails and shouting, came on deck and discovered that his most useless crew member had gone overboard. In the circumstances, he was well within his rights to sail on, as any rescue seemed likely to endanger the rest of the crew. In addition, he could see that his slatting sails were soon going to be shredded. He gave the order to continue on. Yet there must have been some men with heart aboard the *Niobe*, as the captain was overruled and a boat was launched against his orders.

The chances of finding the 'pig boy' were slim, for the seas were wild and the ship had been running at a good eight knots when he had fallen overboard. Things looked especially bleak when the boat's crew found the lifebelt, but no Felix. Yet, just as they were about to turn back, they spotted a group of albatrosses clamouring around something in the water. That something was Felix, and the birds were unquestionably waiting for him to die, but, with their guidance, the lifeboat crew was able to pinpoint Felix and, against all the odds, he was rescued.

The drama didn't end there, because the ship's boat itself was smashed up and sank while the crew were trying to get it back alongside the *Niobe*. It was only with great difficulty that the nine crew were pulled from the sea. Add in the loss of two sails torn to shreds while the rescue was taking

place and there is little question that the captain must have felt he had got a raw deal. Von Luckner, meanwhile, always maintained that he was saved only thanks to the attentions of the albatrosses.

Given all these misadventures, it is entirely understandable that von Luckner quit the *Niobe* when she arrived in Fremantle and went in search of adventures that didn't involve pigs. His life hardly became prosaic, however. During his time Down Under, he worked for the Salvation Army distributing tracts, as a lighthouse keeper's assistant at Cape Leeuwin, and as a kangaroo hunter – and also traversed Australia with a troupe of Hindu fakirs who plied their trade as conjurors. He wound up this spell on dry land by training as a boxer for a group of promoters who wanted to turn him into the boxing champion of Queensland. It wasn't long, however, before the old sea fever returned and von Luckner shipped aboard an American four-masted schooner, the *Golden Shore*, bound for Honolulu.

After this, Felix's life, for several years, becomes a tale of ports of call, billowing sails, hunger, hardship, freedom, frustration and long months of abstinence followed by a few days of dissipation. This was a sailor's life and von Luckner accepted it and embraced it wholeheartedly. The adventures piled up. Von Luckner was always a larger-than-life character and, in his reminisces, it is sometimes hard to distinguish where fact ends and fantasy begins. Favoured yarns spun by von Luckner in later life include an absurdly long 285-day passage from San Francisco to Liverpool aboard the British ship *Pinmore*, leading to most of the crew being hospitalised with scurvy and beriberi upon arrival; a brief spell in the Mexican army; three days' internment in solitary confinement in a Chilean jail; and six days in an open boat after his ship, the *Caesarea*, foundered in a storm.

It would be in Jamaica, however, that the formerly lucky young sailor would hit rock bottom. He had been serving aboard the Canadian schooner *Flying Fish* when an accident while loading broke his leg. He was sent to the hospital with the promise that his back pay would go to the German consulate to settle his medical bills. Three weeks later, he was informed by the hospital that the *Flying Fish* had cleared out and the funds had not been transferred. He was thrown out onto the street, penniless and crippled. He made his way to the beach, where he subsisted on coconuts and whatever he could beg from the locals.

Unshaven, unwashed, hair wild and matted, and with a giant plaster cast on his leg, von Luckner was unable to get any work. At this point, starvation looked like a real possibility; von Luckner's life almost completely unravelled as he languished on that beach, alternately baked by the cloying heat and doused by tropical downpours.

Salvation came in a strange form. Looking out to sea one day, von Luckner espied a beautiful white warship, shimmering like a mirage on those azure waters. It was SMS *Panther*, pride of the German navy. He looked on her and despaired, for she put his own dishevelled sufferings in sharp relief. That night, limping around the streets of Kingston, he encountered some sailors from the *Panther*. Desperately homesick, he hailed them in German and told them his story of woe. The men agreed to give him some food and told him to meet them the following day at the pier where the *Panther*'s men always landed. Von Luckner waited and the men gave him a whole loaf of bread and invited him to come aboard the next day. Dishevelled and desperate, von Luckner had clearly retained enough of his presence and charisma to make these busy men turn his way, take pity on him and decide to help.

By this time, Felix had hacked off his plaster cast and, being one shoe short, had wrapped his leg in an old coal sack. Aware of the terrible state of his appearance, he did all he could to smarten up for his visit, washing his hair and beard in salt water and neatly binding his coal sack. Sadly, all his best efforts were in vain. He was spotted by an officer, who gave the crew members responsible for inviting Felix aboard a thorough dressing down for enticing tramps onto a man-of-war. It was a low moment – probably the lowest of all for von Luckner – yet they say the darkest hour is just before the dawn, and so it was to prove: the men who had taken him under their wing promised to help him out further. That evening they met him ashore, bringing fresh clothes, a pair of shoes, and also the ship's barber, who shaved him and cut his matted hair. Once more, von Luckner was employable and it wasn't long before he had gained a berth on another schooner. The darkest hour had passed and von Luckner always had a special place in his heart for the *Panther*.

It's likely that this encounter with the abyss provided von Luckner with pause for thought and a bit of focus. Shortly afterwards, he returned to Germany and registered in a school of navigation. All those years avoiding education and now he was back to square one. Yet, this time he had focus and drive; he also wanted to see his family again. Back in Lübeck he had picked up a copy of the *Almanach de Gotha* – a sort of Teutonic *Who's Who* – and noted that he, Count Felix von Luckner, was listed, but beneath his name was one stark word: missing. No question, he had been given up for dead.

Felix swore he would return home, but not until he was a commissioned naval officer. From hereon, von Luckner's story became one of steady progress; he passed his examination for mate and worked as an officer

aboard the liner *Petropolis*. Several months' service aboard this vessel qualified him for voluntary service and training in the Imperial Navy.

Much studying later, he was ready to return to the family home, where he presented himself as a lieutenant in the German Imperial Navy. From this point, progression was rapid, and, this being von Luckner, it was also poetic. It happened that while he was serving aboard the SMS *Kaiser*, her namesake, Kaiser Wilhelm, came aboard for a visit. By all accounts, the Kaiser was captivated by young von Luckner – this meteoric officer who had been fast-tracked through the service and who simply overflowed with colourful stories from exotic lands.

The Kaiser liked nothing better after dinner than to hear one of von Luckner's flowery yarns. In the course of one of these post-dinner tales, the Kasier asked his young protégé what his lowest moment had been in all of his years before the mast. After some thought, von Luckner returned to Jamaica, SMS *Panther* and his wretched coal sack. The Kaiser listened quietly and then, as von Luckner recalls, said, 'It would be appropriate and poetic if Luckner went back to the *Panther* now.'

Felix was despatched to Africa, where the *Panther* was on patrol: 'The moment I boarded the *Panther* I went down to the focsle,' he later recalled. 'None of the men I had seen there before were on the ship. I looked around, half expecting to see poor tattered Phelax sitting there somewhere. I sat down where I sat before. Although an officer now in a trim white uniform with gold braid, in reality I was that miserable beachcomber Phelax again.

'I dreamed I had the coal bag on my foot once more. I reached down and felt smooth hose and a smart shoe. I leaned back and dreamed of the coal bag.'[4] The dreamer and adventurer had come full circle but,

for all his achievements, he still dreamt of sail – his first love. A return to a tall ship, however, seemed highly unlikely when Germany plunged into war.

Von Luckner was transferred out of SMS *Panther* and saw action at Jutland aboard SMS *Kronprinz* – one of the Dreadnoughts that was in the very thick of the battle. After Jutland, he was transferred to the raider SMS *Moewe*, which, as we have already seen, had cut quite a dash with her previous blockade-running and raiding. Yet, before von Luckner was able to embark on another spree of destruction aboard this doughty vessel, he was summoned to Berlin to speak with the Admiral.

The interview was short and to the point: 'You are to bring a sailing ship as an auxiliary cruiser through the English blockade. Do you think you can do it?' The Admiral might just as well have asked if he could fulfil von Luckner's wildest dream. Yet von Luckner went into this unlikely venture in a realistic frame of mind, and, when asked about what was required for the venture to succeed, the new commander of SMS *Seeadler* replied without hesitation, 'Luck.'[5]

# 4
# CLOAK AND DAGGER

The winter of 1916 was a hard one in Bremen. As already noted, it was the time of the infamous 'turnip winter' when the British blockade finally started to inflict genuine hardship on the people of Germany. Bremen suffered more than most. This was a big city and a growing one that was key to the war effort. Month on month, its factories churned out weaponry, U-boats and warships. Yet its workforce relied on imports from outlying areas to feed its populace, and the supply line to the city was infuriatingly erratic. Bread rationing had already been in place since 1915 and, as harvests failed in the autumn of 1916, many families found themselves subsisting on boiled turnip.

As winter bit deep, fuel supplies became scarce and shops started to reduce their opening hours. Bremen began to resemble a ghost town. The promise of a short, glorious war had been replaced by interminable suffering. To make matters yet more gruesome, there was an ugly dichotomy at the heart of the city; there were still pockets of Bremen that seemed untouched by war – where gaiety and excess were still there for all to see. You only had to walk past some of the finer restaurants in central Bremen to see their interiors glowing with warmth and bonhomie, promising 'exquisite wines' in addition to 'lobster, oysters and caviar'. All

that comfort and luxury was available if you had enough money. In the meantime, people began to starve.

In the circumstances, it was understandable that people started to talk. Most still supported the Kaiser and his aims, but there were mutterings of dissent. As dissent grew, so too did paranoia; spies were rife, everyone knew that. The British had spent a fortune building up a network of informants and Bremen, with its relative proximity to the Belgian border and a key strategic role in the war, was a focal point for gathering intelligence. The walls had ears and now, as Germany started to buckle under the pressure of war, it felt like you couldn't trust anyone – not even your neighbour.

Down the River Weser at Bremerhaven and Geestemunde, it felt like the nerve centre of Germany's naval war effort; here men swarmed over scaffolds and derricks like worker ants, momentarily flash-framed in the winter gloom by the glare of acetylene, moving to a rhythm hammered out by rivet guns and steam hammers. Some of the most sophisticated vessels the world had ever seen were coming out of these yards. It was therefore strange to see an old-time windjammer tucked away in one corner of Teckleborg's yard. Much work was being undertaken on her and it was heartening for any lover of ships and the sea to witness her royal yards – absent for many years by the looks of it – being replaced and swayed high up aloft. An auxiliary engine was also being fitted.

Word got around that the ship had been the *Pass of Balmaha*, an American merchant vessel, but that she was to be converted into a cadet ship with the aim of training apprentices in the German navy. Much of the supervision of this project seemed to fall on an inspector for the naval Ministry, Herr von Eckmann. Von Eckmann seemed most harassed by the job in hand, and it didn't help that every evening, on returning to his hotel in Geestemunde, he was forced to switch his attentions from one old relic to another: a fellow

ship inspector – long retired – was staying there too and took an inordinate amount of interest in von Eckmann's work. No detail about the conversion of the *Pass of Balmah*a was too trivial for him. Besides, the old man was intrigued by von Eckmann himself. He'd come to the conclusion that there was something not quite right about this so-called inspector.

Suspicions had been raised when von Eckmann had appeared to intercept some mail addressed to a high-ranking naval officer. Ah yes, the relic had spotted that, despite von Eckmann's attempts to conceal it. He started to look more closely at von Eckmann; there was something very English about his countenance, something not quite right there. *I'm on to you, my friend*, the relic thought to himself. He made enquiries with an acquaintance still working within the shipping inspectorate; he had never heard of von Eckmann. Suspicions were quickly solidifying into hard facts. He had unearthed a filthy British spy. He must move quickly: here was a chance to do his bit for the Kaiser!

Things came to a head on a spectacularly trying day for Count von Luckner. It started on the train to Bremen, where von Luckner was headed on business. A detective came into the carriage and attempted to arrest him, only to discover with acute embarrassment that he was trying to arrest a high-ranking naval officer. Now von Luckner was truly concerned; despite going to extreme lengths to fabricate the most elaborate story surrounding the *Pass of Balmaha* and her new role within the war effort – and even going incognito himself as 'von Eckmann' – it now appeared that a spy was at large. His entire mission was compromised. The officer said that the spy was reported to be staying at the same hotel he was staying at in Geestemunde. Perhaps it was that blasted old relic who was constantly shadowing him? Who knew, but if his secret was out, the mission might be aborted. He cursed his luck. Then, to his utter bewilderment, he was

once again arrested upon arriving at Hillman's Hotel in Bremen. What in hell was happening? Thanks to his evident high rank, von Luckner was able to dismiss this detective too, urging him to redouble his efforts to locate the spy at all costs.

The evening was wearing on, and it had been a profoundly odd and somewhat chastening day for von Luckner. In the hopes that a drink would help, he headed to a local café, the Trocadero, and ordered a bottle of wine. He made himself comfortable and settled in to ponder the rather uncertain future of his raider. Sipping gloomily at his drink, he allowed himself to unwind a fraction – yet that was all he was allowed, because there, at his shoulder once more, was the bloody detective! This time, the officer was flanked by two armed guards who clearly meant business. Von Luckner finally lost the plot and began yelling at the Sherlock. Suddenly he realised all eyes in the Trocadero were on him. There were plenty of patriots here who knew the drill when it came to informants; they surrounded von Luckner and cries of 'Kill the spy!' rang out from more enthusiastic patriots. Suddenly, his captors became his protectors and it was only with some difficulty that they forced a way through the clamour and extricated their suspect.

Many hours of explaining later, and it was all straightened out; von Luckner was, of course, von Eckmann. His cunning disguise had rather backfired, that was all. There were red faces all round and the spy catcher was swiftly ejected from the hotel in Geestemunde and requested to take his misplaced patriotic zeal and amateur sleuth work elsewhere. Fortunately, von Luckner's – or Von Eckmann's – cover had not been blown in Geestemunde, so the refit could continue on the *Pass of Balmaha*.

By now, work was well underway. A 1,000hp auxiliary diesel had been fitted, along with huge fuel and water tanks that would allow her to keep

to the seas for months on end. In addition, the 'tween decks had been converted into accommodation, with room for up to 400 prisoners of war. Gun placements had to be carefully built into the superstructure and artfully concealed by sections of the bulwarks fore and aft, which folded down to reveal the pair of four-inch guns. This was her main armament, backed up with machine guns. It didn't seem much, bearing in mind that a Dreadnought battleship mounted 12-inch guns as the main armament, but it would more than suffice for capturing unarmed merchant vessels. Beyond this, there was also a hidden compartment below decks where a group of armed men could be hidden if the ship was boarded and inspected while running the blockade.

The issue of running the blockade was dealt with assiduously. The ship would be disguised as a Norwegian trader and given a cargo of lumber. This would take up the whole deck and make access to the hold impossible for anyone trying to inspect the vessel without diverting her to a port and unloading her cargo. The Germans hoped the British would not choose to be so finicky with a harmless old windjammer. Once the ship was clear of the blockade, this cargo could be jettisoned and the raider could get down to business. In order to perfect the disguise, it was important to assume the identity of a similar Norwegian ship that would be sailing at roughly the same time. That would mean that should the ship be stopped by the British, the story would check out when the details were wirelessed back to HQ in London. It just so happened that a Norwegian ship, *Maletta*, was due to leave Copenhagen at around the time that the *Pass of Balmaha* would be ready to sail, so the decision was taken to simply steal her identity.

The *Maletta* was a fine choice, having been launched as the *Clan Robertson* in 1884 from the same yard as the *Pass of Balmaha*. The two

ships naturally shared a lot of attributes and it was just a case of making sure some of the finer points matched up to ensure the perfect cover: it was discovered that the *Maletta* had just had a new motor winch fitted, so the *Pass of Balmaha* followed suit.

Von Luckner's own reminisces show just how thorough the subterfuge was:

*There could be nothing German. In the saloon, the Norwegian king and queen smile mildly from the wall. Norwegian pillows lay there with the flag of the country.*

*Then there were the letters, written from Norway to me and my men. We were worried because every sailor always carries the cigar box full of letters. I needed business letters and love letters. We had to reckon that our ship seemed suspicious to the investigating enemy, and he thoroughly examined not only the ship's papers, but also the crew.*

*Supposing that the inspecting officer is given by the captain the papers of any man, and then asks him personally all sorts of questions about the appearance of his place of residence? What is the name of the mayor or the headmaster or his aunt, or on which ship he was three years ago, what voyage he made with this ship. We had to prepare for every such example, and avoid every possibility.*

*Even the photographs of the people had to bear real company names, for every photographer marks his own work with his signature.*

*The most difficult work was the letters, as I said, a seaman kept some of the post which he received for years. The stamps had to be marked with stamps of departure and arrival, for Hong Kong,*

*Honolulu, Yokohama, where the person had been just before and had received letters. In short, stamps from all parts of the world were necessary.*[1]

With that level of detail, it was clear no stone had been left unturned. Well, almost no stone. To enjoy the perfect cover, they really needed the logbook of the *Maletta*. Von Luckner pondered this and realised it wasn't such a tall order to get hold of it. After all, the ship in question was moored up not so many miles away in neutral Denmark. There was nothing to stop him slipping across to Copenhagen and seeing what could be done about lifting the official papers off the *Maletta*. All that was required was a little finesse.

Von Luckner headed to Copenhagen, donned a set of shabby civilian clothes, and headed along the icy streets down to the docks. There the *Maletta* lay at rest after a voyage back from Argentina loaded with grain. Von Luckner took the time to note her every particular. Yet the question still remained: how was he supposed to get hold of the logbook? He knew it would be somewhere in the captain's cabin, and although the boat was being operated with a skeleton crew and the officers were all away, there was still a watchman stationed aft day and night. It was time to don a new disguise and hope it worked a little better than that of von Eckmann.

Waiting until nightfall, von Luckner assumed the guise of a customs officer. Stealing aboard the *Maletta*, he loosed off the bow lines, and in the offshore breeze her bow began to pay off. Suddenly, all was action aboard and the watchman rushed forward to see what the trouble was. Von Luckner seized his opportunity, stole aft and sneaked into the captain's cabin. After a frantic search, he discovered the logbook under the skipper's mattress, pocketed it and headed back out on deck.

In the chaos of people shouting and throwing ropes as the *Maletta* threatened to swing across the dock, Von Luckner was able to enter seamlessly into the mêlée, helping to once more secure the *Maletta* before slipping over the side and into the frozen night, the final piece of the jigsaw tucked beneath his great coat. Surely now they could cheat the blockade?

Back in Bremen, things were beginning to move: a crew had been hand-picked, comprising 24 'Norwegian' sailors, who would man the ship until they broke through the blockade, and 36 others, who would be hidden down below until the coast was clear. It was key for the 'Norwegians' to have a decent grasp of the language, so sailors were picked who had served on Norwegian tall ships in the past. This was not as difficult as you might imagine, as Norway owned one of the largest fleets of windjammers in the world prior to World War I, having spent much of the previous decade buying old British tall ships at fire-sale prices.

Once picked, the crew were told nothing specific about their assignment, but were promptly sent home so that they could not gather together in Geestemunde and inevitably talk about their mysterious voyage. The core members of von Luckner's afterguard were also hand-picked and included First Lieutenant Alfred Kling, who was rewarded for his pioneering work in getting the project off the ground.

Kling was an interesting man who had distinguished himself as part of the Filchner expedition, which had set out to explore the Antarctic in 1911. The expedition, although not wildly successful, had managed to penetrate deeper into the Weddell Sea than anyone had before, and Kling returned a minor celebrity. He was clearly a driven man who was to prove highly loyal and extremely efficient. In many ways, he was the ideal foil for the charismatic and sometimes bombastic von Luckner.

Von Luckner's prize officer was fittingly called Lieutenant Richard Pries, and he was the only officer personally selected by von Luckner. He was a self-confident man who appears to have had something of the bully boy about him. This was not necessarily a bad attribute for a prize officer to have, as he was responsible for boarding captured ships and overwhelming their crews. Nevertheless, other flaws in his character were to be ruthlessly exposed later.

The medical officer, Rudolf Pietsch, had previously served aboard the raider SMS *Moewe* and was undoubtedly a first-class physician, despite plenty of anecdotal evidence that he had a real weakness for booze. On the other hand, the navigation and artillery officer Karl Theodor Kircheiss was a highly accomplished sailor and a first-class navigator who could be relied on in almost any situation.

These men were the backbone of a raider's crew and von Luckner knew from the start that he had done well: 'With that team, one could fight ten times over. They were all good, honest sailors, who were always willing to stake their lives on their beloved fatherland.'[2]

All that remained was to choose a name for the vessel. Von Luckner rather favoured *Albatros*, in honour of the birds that had saved his life after he fell from the rigging of the *Niobe*, but unfortunately another naval vessel had already nabbed it. Von Luckner then proposed *Seeteufel* (Sea Devil), but the Admiralty baulked at that, compromising on *Seeadler* (Sea Eagle).

On a dark November night, the SMS *Seeadler* motored away from her berth at Teckleborg's yard and made her way down the River Weser, chill and purple in the gathering dusk. Her crew and captain were not aboard yet, but they were waiting, mustered on the dockside. They were loaded by lantern light into a steamer that shadowed the lights of the tall ship as

she made her stately way down the river towards the icy expanse of the North Sea – dark spars against the starlit sky, her sidelights shining out green and red.

The sailors stared at the windjammer ahead and still had no idea what lay in store for them, why they had been picked for this mission, or where they were bound. They were astonished when they were loaded aboard the *Seeadler*. Still they were not told what they were doing; instead, they sailed up the North Sea and anchored off the Island of Sylt near the Danish border. Once again, the anchor rattled down and finally the crew were briefed on their mission, and confronted with the brutal fact that they might not see their families for many months on end. In fact, there was a strong chance they would never see the Fatherland again.

They were split into two parties: German speaking and Norwegian speaking. The 'Norwegians' were given new names, clothes and possessions and were thoroughly drilled in every minute detail of their new identities. Meanwhile, a lighter pulled alongside and commenced to load the *Seeadler* with her deck cargo of timber. The stage was set and the raider was primed to bust through the blockade, come what may. All that was required was the order to sail. It didn't come for three weeks.

Three weeks were spent swinging idly at anchor. For von Luckner, the delay must have been infuriating; all aboard would have been primed and ready to go, tense with excitement and the nagging fear that the mission might be aborted. Yet they had to wait. The reason for the delay was that another blockade buster, the U-boat *Deutschland*, was due to return.

The *Deutschland* was a huge, unarmed U-boat being used by the Norddeutcherlloyd Company to break the blockade and maintain trade with the USA. This was her second voyage and she was on the return leg, loaded with 6.5 tons of silver bullion. Naturally, the British blockade had

got wind of this and was eager to capture her – the effect on German morale would have been severe. The problem from the *Seeadler*'s point of view was that patrols had been significantly stepped up in the North Sea, so it was decided that the raider should wait it out until the *Deutschland* made it back to Germany.

The big U-boat did eventually slip the net, but the delay was catastrophic for the *Seeadler*, as it meant that the *Maletta* had already sailed, rendering the entire cover story useless. Frantically, the officers of the *Seeadler* scanned Lloyd's Register for a ship that matched her. They spotted the *Karmo*, and although they had no idea where she was in the world, set about doctoring ship's papers and logbook to match the new vessel. It was a long shot, but von Luckner just wanted to get away and get on with the job in hand.

Then, by chance, they heard from a Norwegian newspaper that the *Karmo* had been stopped from passing through the blockade and sent into Kirkwall. There was nothing for it but to get the logbook out again and get busy with the eraser. Another ship was found, the *Irma*, also matching the *Seeadler's* description. Yet, this time, disaster struck; the logbook couldn't stand up to these repeated assaults with the eraser and began to disintegrate. It looked like all was lost.

What to do? It certainly wouldn't pay to take the Royal Navy for fools; von Luckner knew better than that, and he also knew that the chances of being stopped were very high. Yet there had to be some course of action.

In the end, desperation took over. The carpenter was summoned to the saloon and told to bring his axe. The plan was to make it look like the old windjammer had taken one hell of a battering at the hands of a storm, drench all the paperwork, and then apologise profusely to the

British when they asked to see the ship's papers. It was a desperately long shot, but the options were getting narrower by the day.

The carpenter set to with his axe and then went about roughly patching the damage while bucketloads of seawater were thrown around the saloon – crucially, over that offending logbook. Meantime, a new name, *Hero* – stolen from a Norwegian ship on the register and abroad at the time – was painted on her stern and cutwater. Once again, they were all set to depart, but still awaited their orders.

It is likely that it was during this spell of interminable waiting that the plan to give the Norwegian captain a wife was perfected. It was not unusual aboard merchant vessels for the captain to bring his wife along, and the theory was that if a British officer boarded the *Seeadler* and was met with a lady in the saloon, it would awaken his chivalrous side and he would be less likely to be overly officious. It was a rather fanciful plan, but nevertheless, von Luckner evidently felt it was worth a try.

Von Luckner's confidence was buoyed when he discovered that one of the mechanic's assistants, Schmidt, was particularly feminine: smooth-faced with fine features. He would serve well. A blonde wig and dress had already been procured before departure, so now all that remained was to school Schmidt to adopt a slightly more feminine stance and to fit him out with a suitable pair of breasts. The results were startling and more than one member of *Seeadler*'s crew found themselves viewing Schmidt in a disturbingly different light after he minced coquettishly along the main deck in his gladrags. That was, until they looked down at Schmidt's feet. They were, quite frankly, huge. Schmidt's voice was also unavoidably gravelly and his efforts to adopt a falsetto were deeply alarming and far from convincing. It was therefore decided that, should the British board, he would hide his feet under a blanket or

similar and feign toothache. A bandage around the mouth would limit conversation nicely.

In the meantime, all on board spent their time practising their Norwegian and earnestly chewing quids of tobacco, which was highly favoured among Norwegian sailors. To chew proficiently and spit neatly over the side marked you out as a true Nordic sea salt, and after three weeks the whole crew was chewing with gusto and newfound expertise.

Finally, on 23 December, von Luckner and his crew got the order they'd been waiting for. 'Proceed at your own discretion.' 'It was the most beautiful moment when I announced this to my crew,' von Luckner later recalled.[3] Suddenly the *Seeadler*, idle and listless for so many weeks, was alive once more. The decks resounded with the tramping of many feet and the spars echoed to the sound of shanties as the anchor was hauled up. High up in the rigging, gaskets were loosed and acres of billowing white sails were freed to the breeze, crackling in the fresh wind until they were sheeted home with a purposeful thump. The *Seeadler* was on her way and she shivered to the breeze, seeming to tremble at the thrill of having finally made her escape.

Aloft, the men heard the beautiful sound of a fresh wind blowing through strong rigging. They felt the ship move beneath them, alive with the wind, and they all smiled and slapped each other on the back. Their mission would be a tough one, but what had seemed hopeless and insurmountable while they were swinging impotent at anchor now seemed possible.

Up on the poop, the captain felt a similar thrill. This was von Luckner's first command and it was hard to believe that what was happening was actually real, for the *Seeadler* combined every dream and ambition he had

ever harboured. Before her lay the open ocean and untold adventure. She was a raider on a roving commission: the last ever sailing warship and the world really was her oyster: the South Atlantic, Cape Horn, the Pacific and beyond all unfurled before von Luckner as he stared at the brooding horizon already bruised by nightfall. Just beneath that distant horizon, the enemy lay in wait. At some point, they were almost certain to encounter the British navy. Could they fool them? It was going to take an almighty slice of good fortune.

# 5
# DANGEROUS WATERS

There was one enemy that was far more intimidating and awe-inspiring than the British, and that was the sea itself. The Skagerrak peninsula in December is a far from friendly stretch of coastline. Von Luckner had wanted it to look as though the *Hero* had taken a beating by the elements, and there was a fair chance this wish would become reality before she was clear of northern latitudes. A course had been laid that followed the coast of Norway, before heading east around the Orkneys and then out into the Atlantic.

The *Seeadler* sped forth on her mission beneath darkening skies. It was evident that they were in for a spell of heavy weather, and while a capful of wind might help them on their way and also make running the blockade that much easier, there was always a danger that they would get more than they bargained for. The *Seeadler* was a seaworthy vessel designed to weather the heaviest Cape Horn storm, but with the iron coast of Denmark close to hand, it would not pay to be cornered by some malicious gale. The wind was already piping through the rigging at a slightly higher octave as von Luckner warily eyed the unwelcoming slab of land to the east. For all that the open sea lay to the west, the *Seeadler* was actually in a tight corner, as the British had laid an extensive

minefield some miles to the west of the Danish coast. At present she was therefore running northward before the southerly wind towards the tip of the Skagerrak peninsula, in what was effectively a narrow corridor of water. All was well, provided the breeze didn't shift to the north.

As any sailor knows, the sea is a cruel mistress and the wind is also a capricious friend. Within hours of setting out, the wind immediately swung through 180 degrees and started to blow pretty vigorously from the north. The trap had been set and there were precious few options. To head into a Danish port would have been to risk internment for the remainder of the war; von Luckner had the choice of either running back to a German port or turning the *Seeadler*'s bow to the west and playing a game of Russian roulette with the minefield. He opted to turn west. His decision tells you everything you need to know about the man who was in charge of the *Seeadler*. It was not a sane or sensible move – it showed a sort of reckless dare that bordered on suicidal. It also demonstrated that he wanted to get his ship out and raiding at any cost.

Although the move was extremely rash, there were perhaps some mitigating circumstances: the weather was worsening and showed every sign of developing into a severe storm. Running back to Germany meant running towards a lee shore, when what the *Seeadler* really needed was plenty of sea room to ride out the storm in safety. In addition, von Luckner reasoned that the mines had been laid underwater, and with his ship heeled hard over, she would draw considerably less than your typical steamship. There was therefore a chance she could sail right over the mines.

'We did not want to go back, and mines have gaps between them, the land did not!'[1] von Luckner reflected. It was a big call to make. All the men were mustered on deck and the lifeboats were swung out on the davits ready to be launched should the worst happen. All aboard took

a collective deep breath and hoped. Evidently von Luckner's guardian angel was watching over the ship, as she sailed through the minefield unscathed.

To look at this from a cold, rational point of view, it's easy to argue that von Luckner was insane; the move could well have seen him court-martialled had he failed and wrecked the *Seeadler*. But it was the sort of swashbuckling act that spelt out how von Luckner viewed himself and the *Seeadler*: the last corsair, a fearless, lawless raider unconstrained by such humdrum considerations as safety or prudence.

The *Seeadler* had enjoyed her first lucky escape, yet she was not out of the woods. There was a blockade to be run and von Luckner was faced with the choice of hugging the Norwegian coast or taking a more direct line that brought the *Seeadler* closer to Britain. Inevitably, von Luckner took the latter course, and there was plenty of logic in this move. The normal procedure for German cruisers was to hug the Norwegian coastline. This meant that if they were cornered they could duck into a Norwegian port and suffer internment rather than capture. Yet the *Seeadler* was posing as an innocent trader with nothing to hide, so it made sense to take the most direct route out into the Atlantic.

As the *Seeadler* proceeded north, the wind helpfully swung back round to the south-west and picked up still further until it was shrieking through the rigging. The weather was alarming, but it had to be viewed as a blessing, for it had churned up a nasty sea that meant it was almost impossible for any blockading vessel to stop the *Seeadler*. Even if a patrol vessel had managed to pick out the raider amid the spume and gloom, there was no way a boat could have been launched with any degree of safety. This was the *Seeadler*'s chance, and she drove on before the building storm with every stitch of canvas that von Luckner dared to

carry. In the circumstances, unsurprisingly, von Luckner dared to carry a great deal of canvas. He had no parsimonious shipowner to answer to for starters, and the *Seeadler*, having just undergone an extensive refit, was sound alow and aloft.

She ran on before the storm into the darkness. At times the wind hit force 10 and the *Seeadler*'s lee rail would dip underwater as the boat took a plunge, sending up a great welter of spray glowing red in the glare of her port light, scattering like sparks in the breeze. Then she would be up again, shaking herself free of the water like an enthusiastic Labrador, her scuppers running white like a lakeland stream in full spate. All was noise, with the wind roaring in the rigging above and sheets of icy water hissing up over her bow, rapping the headsails as if in rebuke. At the helm, two men wrestled desperately with the wheel and the ship hit 15 knots, hurled forward by the waves through that dark and terrible night.

The blockade was structured into three distinct lines of patrol vessels, with the outer line between the Hebrides and Bergen being the most rigorously patrolled. By midnight, the *Seeadler* had run through the first and second lines of the blockade without seeing any ships at all; all aboard knew that they were approaching the crucial third outer line and were ready for action. Yet the crew of the *Seeadler* did not see a single ship, and one of the most extensive blockades was run through with almost embarrassing ease. By the following morning, the threat of the blockade had been replaced by a new menace: ice.

Once clear of the Gulf Stream, the *Seeadler* continued to run north-west towards Iceland and temperatures plummeted. With the gale still howling, the great seas that came aboard simply froze where they landed. The rigging and blocks were encrusted in ice and it became necessary to

send men aloft to chip away as much of it as possible. The ship was all but unmanageable and there seemed a very real risk that she would simply be driven before the gale all the way to the Arctic Circle. All they could do was pray for a change in the direction of the wind, and late on Christmas Eve, the heavens duly obliged, with the gale moderating and swinging around the compass to a more favourable direction. The *Seeadler* was free to head south. The auxiliary engines were fired up to help her on her way and the raider commenced tiptoeing around the northern limit of the blockade. It seemed that the first part of her mission had – against all odds – been accomplished.

Christmas Day dawned crisp and unimaginably cold. There were only a couple of hours of daylight up in these latitudes, and although the men were still on high alert, there were hopes of enjoying a pleasant, albeit chilly, Christmas afloat. But then: disaster. A telltale plume of smoke on the horizon could mean only one thing – the British navy – for it was very unlikely any trader would be hanging around in these latitudes, unless it was another hapless windjammer blown hopelessly off course.

A few minutes later and HMS *Patia* came steaming into view. This encounter has already been described, but there are a few details that need to be cleared up. Once the *Seeadler* – or '*Hero*' – hove-to, her crew began to make preparations to greet their visitors. The storm they had run through had very obligingly provided them with all the storm damage they required to put together a convincing case on that front, and once Schmidt had donned his party frock, it seemed like all was set. Down below, the 'German' contingent were armed and briefed that, if the worst came to the worst, they were to open the sea cocks and lay charges with which to detonate the ship. They were then locked in while the 'Norwegian' part of the crew prepared to greet their visitors.

All seemed well, until von Luckner headed into the saloon to prepare his papers and get Schmidt, or 'Josefeena' as he was to be called, comfortable, with his feet nicely concealed. As soon as he stepped below, he knew they were in trouble; the *Seeadler* had been running her engines and the whole place reeked of petrol! There was nothing in her papers about auxiliary engines and, in the circumstances, it would have been natural for the British to smell a rat. The solution was to fight fire with fire – or stench with stench: fortunately there was a paraffin stove in the saloon and a rug was hastily jammed up the chimney. Noxious fumes filled the saloon until poor Josefeena's eyes were streaming. The smell had been nicely neutralised.

Von Luckner cut himself a big quid of tobacco and chewed on it as calmly as he could while he prepared to offer a genial welcome to his guests. Just before the British stepped aboard, he poured himself a generous whisky and downed it in one. Dutch courage was going to be required in the circumstances.

During the ensuing encounter with the British, there had been a few hairy moments. For one thing, von Luckner had been so aghast when Lieutenant Holland asked why the ship had been hanging around at anchor for three weeks after departure that he had actually swallowed his quid of tobacco whole. Fortunately, Kircheiss had been able to come up with an answer, and although von Luckner had spent the rest of the Royal Navy's visit resisting the urge to vomit, he managed to keep it down.

There had been another close call during the officers' departure: the boat crew had made a terrible mess of getting away, with the result that they had drifted aft until they were abreast the *Seeadler*'s propellers, which were visible beneath the water. At this point, von Luckner had

begun shouting and threw a rope to distract the officers, and they had rowed away none the wiser.

Most dangerous of all, there had been confusion down below among the 'German' crew. Towards the end of Lieutenant Holland's visit he had requested that the '*Hero*' stand by for an hour while they radioed London to ensure her details checked out. At this moment, one crew member, well out of earshot of the British, had murmured, 'All is lost.' Somehow this was transmitted around the ship and even communicated down into the hold, where the men lay awaiting further orders. Upon hearing this, they knew what to do and promptly opened the sea cocks and set about laying fuses. By the time von Luckner was able to open up the hold and tell the men the good news, the *Seeadler* was halfway to being destroyed.

Nevertheless, the critical moment passed, and as the *Patia* receded over the horizon, they knew they were in the clear. It had genuinely taken a huge slice of luck to get through the blockade, but they were through and the next move was to get on with the serious business of raiding. Actually, that's not quite true. Von Luckner was always a man who appreciated the finer things in life, and his first priority was to celebrate Christmas in some style.

Prior to departure, Bertha Krupp, wealthy heiress to the Krupp industrial empire, had donated a huge hamper of Christmas gifts, which had been concealed in the hold. This was now broached, revealing a wealth of cigars, liquor, clothing and other luxuries. The saloon was hastily cleared up and decked out in preparation for a celebratory meal. The whole crew sat down, a band of brothers out here on the high seas, as von Luckner recalls: 'We were seated in the saloon, a narrow room; There was hardly room, you sat down on the table, so that you could sit with all the guys.

'There was a Christmas wreath for our guardian angel, and a second for our supreme warlord. Now all the thoughts rested at home with the family. None of them knew where we were. Every mile took us farther away, encircled by enemies, no help from home could reach us anymore.

'But where there is a will there is also a way and we wanted to honour the German name and show the enemies what Germany is, even if we were only a small group of 64.'[2]

Post dinner, the men luxuriated in the warmth of the saloon, their appetites sated, and puffed away on cigars, sipping cognac and lazily exchanging reminisces of Christmases past. It was a pause, a glorious moment of reflection before they got down to work.

# 6
# SEARCH AND DESTROY

While our heroes were reclining in the comfort of the *Seeadler*'s saloon, a band of brothers fighting a war in just the manner it is intended to be fought, it's important to remind ourselves of what World War I was actually about. Von Luckner and his brothers in arms may have been creating the sort of yarn that reads as a cross between pulp fiction, a boy's own adventure and a fairy tale, but back in mainland Europe something else was going on that was rather less easy to stomach.

Bertha Krupp may have supplied the crew of *Seeadler* with a hamper full of Christmas gifts, but she had a different gift for the men on the front line. Krupp's super-heavy howitzer gun was affectionately nicknamed 'Big Bertha' (*Dicke Bertha* in German) in honour of Ms Krupp and was so powerful that operators had to detonate it with their mouths open and cotton wadding stuffed up their nose and ears to prevent their eardrums from bursting. Big Bertha was just one of many automated weapons in this newly mechanised style of warfare that was destroying men with supreme, grisly efficiency.

The 25th of December 1916 was just another day in the trenches. The Christmas truce of 1914 was now long forgotten. It had been one of the few sparks of humanity in the mass of mud – a little glimmer of hope

amid the massacre. Yet that hope had been snuffed out by generals such as Haig, who feared that such fraternisation with the enemy created the risk of seeing them for what they were: human beings. Neither the Western Front nor the Eastern one was a place where humanity could be allowed to show its face. Otherwise, there was a real danger that men would genuinely drop their weapons and walk away.

By December 1916, the mind-shatteringly destructive Somme campaign had been suspended after a five-month onslaught by British and French troops, which had seen the Allies advance seven miles with a total loss of roughly a million men. On the first day of the campaign, 19,000 British soldiers alone were killed. You couldn't have killed people much more efficiently if you had just lined them up against a wall and shot them.

As *Seeadler* was preparing to leave Geestemunde on her swashbuckling mission in late November, both sides were digging in for another winter in the trenches. Von Luckner and his men might have had no conception of the horrors of the Western Front, but they were navy men and they knew death and how close it was at hand as they proceeded down the Atlantic in their lightly armed raider. In fact, many aboard would still have expected to be intercepted, for the previous year the Royal Navy's ninth squadron had patrolled the central Atlantic assiduously and it would have been very difficult for a slow-moving sailing ship to slip through. Fortunately for the *Seeadler*, conditions had changed thanks to Germany's resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare. This had led to Britain's decision that no Allied troopships should use the Mediterranean route to and from Australia and New Zealand. Instead, they were required to use the longer route down the Atlantic, while the ships of the ninth squadron were switched from their blockading duties to working as full-time escorts to the troopships.

The door had been left open to the *Seeadler*, yet the sailors aboard her were wary: ready for destruction at the hands of the Royal Navy and certainly willing to go down with a fight. Most had already seen action at Jutland, and von Luckner himself had been in the thick of the battle. He had watched as HMS *Indefatigable* had essentially dissolved before his eyes after her magazine was hit by a shell. He later described it in vivid terms:

> *You do not yet understand what it means, you have not yet participated in a battle, nor seen a warship truly until you can see how its armoured body is torn apart in pieces and swirls into the air, like everything has been liquidised … 300,000kg of powder, which the ship carried, caused the explosion. Everything that is aboard, both people and material, is hurled upward; grenades, machines, guns. The guns, which are still loaded, are blasting in the air. The huge oil content of the ship belches upward and spreads out, burning, over the water's surface. Into this burning sea are hurled the glowing last remnants of the ship, hissing as they land. The North Sea is burning and boiling. Above the debris there is an immense smoke cone for a long time, as after the eruption of a volcano.*[1]

A total of 8,500 sailors died in a single day at Jutland, yet, for both navies, it was, in many ways, the beginning and the end of the conflict. That sort of meaningless slaughter and destruction at sea did not – could not – go on, and both fleets returned to their respective bases. They continued to engage in the occasional foray and light skirmish, combined with raiding and blockading, until the war ended.

Unlike the troops at the Somme, sailors could still believe in their cause. Despite the frustrating skullduggery, the underhand tactics of Q ships and U-boats, and the interminable and illegal blockading, it was still possible to view the war at sea as something honourable. Out at sea, perceptions of the war were different, and von Luckner could head out into the Atlantic – into battle – with a belief that he was fighting for something decent and right.

The *Seeadler* prepared herself for battle. A pair of 18-foot motor launches that had been concealed in the hold were brought on deck for boarding work, and the two four-inch guns were also mounted. She was ready to go raiding. Yet von Luckner's priorities were not quite what you might expect for a ship of war, and his method of running the ship was also not precisely out of the textbook on naval protocol, as this recollection by von Luckner illustrates:

*We went south and headed with full sails without motor to Madeira. Now the saloon and all the chambers could be made homely, the beautiful carpets, pictures and armchairs were brought out. The shipyard had done well and we had everything on board right through to Meyer's* Konversations Lexikon *[a German encyclopaedia], which was of great value to us, for it told us every fish, and was an arbitrator in the learned debates which arise from so long a life on board.*

*The rooms were painted beautifully and the teak wood was scrubbed outside so that one again felt on a German war ship. Now the masts bent under the sails and everything was joyous, free and without worries on our ship. We had instructions to attack only sailing ships. The belief being that a sailing ship against a steamer does not work!*

*Perhaps this was the reason why they had given us such poor reinforcement. Of our two guns, only one could ever be used against the enemy at any given time. Nevertheless, we wanted to be the master of what little we had. The gun team did the same thing on its own part, and wanted to be sure that no ship had a better one.*

*Through drills and precision, we became a formidable opponent. Our armament was, of course, weak, and strategic rules and normal warfare at sea could not enable a sailing ship to succeed in war, so the [German] Admiralty's lack of confidence in our untried business was not so incomprehensible. But we relied on loyalty, will and the German spirit, which, when fresh, can succeed over everything. Bluff and cunning should be our real but invisible reinforcement.*

*We had two lookout points. A lookout with a comfortable seat in it high up in the mast. Only a man who sits comfortably and securely watches well. Secondly, one of the under-officers sat in the bow. The one who reported a ship first got a bottle of champagne.*[2]

The strategy for capturing and destroying enemy shipping was as simple as it was to prove effective. Upon sighting an Allied vessel, the Norwegian flag was flown, along with a signal asking for chronometer time. This was a common request out at sea and almost all fellow skippers were happy to oblige. Once within range, the *Seeadler*'s guns were to be run out and the victim ordered to surrender. The plan was that, once a vessel had surrendered and its crew evacuated, the vessel would be sunk. The orders were to attack only sailing ships. Von Luckner, of course, had other ideas, and it is perhaps a valuable insight into his psyche that he also later claimed that he hoisted the Jolly Roger when the *Seeadler* went into attack mode.

As the *Seadler* made ready, events were also unfolding at the Admiralty back in London. You may recall that there had been some confusion in the telegraph office. In London, the inexperienced officer had eventually replied with '*Hero* is all right,' which had been enough to allow the *Seeadler* to proceed on her way. Yet, after Christmas, more seasoned staff had been operating the wireless. In addition, the office in Copenhagen that had closed for Christmas was back up and running. A perfunctory check revealed that no *Hero* had left Copenhagen on the date specified. This meant that there was now a rogue windjammer roving the seas. A new raider? Surely not. Nevertheless, all cruisers were briefed to keep a sharp eye out for this anomaly. As they pressed on, the Admiralty had received their first inkling that something was awry, and their eyes were trained on the Atlantic in an attempt to see if anything was afoot. They did not have to wait too long to find out.

# 7
# FIRST BLOOD

On 9 January 1917, the *Gladys Royle* was bound for Buenos Aires from Cardiff with a cargo of coal. She had been at sea a week and all aboard were beginning to wind down after a tense beginning to their voyage. For her captain, William Shewan, it had been a week of horrible uncertainty. Once they were clear of the western approaches, plagued as they were with mines and U-boats, and heading due south into warmer climes, there was a perceptible feeling of relief, an uncoiling of the spring.

At the end of a full week of steaming, the *Gladys Royle* was not far from Madeira. A fresh westerly breeze was blowing and the ship was butting gamely into the seas, doused by the occasional shower of rain. At 9.30am, the lookout reported a sailing ship on the starboard bow, roughly five miles off. It was soon apparent that she was steering for them, reaching across before the breeze at a good seven knots. Evidently, she wanted to talk.

Initially, Captain Shewan made little of this. Shewan was 41 in 1917 and a native of the Hebrides. In his youth, sailing ships had dominated his life, for the fishing fleet up there still relied on sail, as did most of the local trading schooners. It doubtless did his heart good to see this old-timer slicing along so purposefully, her sails curved, powerful,

beautiful, as she set a course to intercept his own ship, dipping her bow into the seas occasionally and showering great feathery sprays over the foredeck.

Binoculars were trained on the windjammer and it was perceived that she was Norwegian. Her desire to 'speak' – as sailors termed it – to the *Gladys Royle* was also clear, for she flew a signal flag requesting chronometer time. This seemed fair enough to Shewan. An accurate time was vital to navigation and some of these Norwegian sailing ships were being run on an absolute shoestring. It was more than possible she had a dud timepiece.

Shewan ordered the engines slowed and moved to windward of the sailing vessel so that she could heave-to. That was when things stopped making sense. First up, the Norwegian flag came tumbling down and up shot a German flag. Next, a section of her rail forward dropped down with a mighty metallic clang and revealed … guns. Well, a gun at least, and it was trained in the general direction of the *Gladys Royle*. In fact … damn it, there was a shot across the bows.

Shewan was bewildered; he wasn't sure what to make of what was going on. It all had a slightly surreal, dreamlike quality. There was also a faint chance that the windjammer was simply following the old protocol of requesting chronometer time by firing a blank shot. Perhaps … yet there was that German flag. Something felt altogether wrong and Shewan decided that the best plan was simply to put a good safe distance between himself and this odd ship. Sailing vessels can't travel directly into the wind, so Shewan opted to head that way. It was no use though. It soon became clear that the mysterious adversary had a motor, and as she pursued the steamship, more shots were fired. Shewan realised there was nothing for it: he had to surrender.

At this point, Shewan's curiosity got the better of him. He decided to go and find out for himself; he ordered a boat launched and was rowed smartly over to the mysterious stranger. Stepping aboard, he was greeted cordially by her skipper, who revealed himself as Count Felix von Luckner.

He was a big, strapping chap with a certain twinkle in his eye and little of the severity or self-importance you would expect from a naval officer. He spoke excellent and extremely courteous English and, somehow, it was difficult not to feel at ease in his presence, despite the fraught circumstances.

Shewan decided it was worth appealing to this man's better nature, stating that the *Gladys Royle* had been headed for a neutral port and, besides, he lied, *Gladys Royle* was owned by him and he had a wife and children to support back home. Von Luckner looked at him with sympathetic eyes. 'Tell me, Captain Shewan,' he said, 'do you believe that in the same circumstances, a British naval officer would show any mercy to a German ship?'[1] Shewan knew the answer and was defeated. He excused his running away by stating that he had misread the signs and thought both ships were under attack from a U-boat. It was a weak excuse, but von Luckner evidently didn't care. The crew was already busying itself, preparing to transship supplies, crew and belongings from the *Gladys Royle*, and, within a matter of hours, the steamer had been evacuated and charges detonated in her hold.

As dusk fell, there was a dull roar from deep within the guts of the old ship and Captain Shewan looked on gravely as the *Gladys Royle* settled, silhouetted against the twilight, preparing for her final plunge to a watery grave. It was a sickening blow to him and he faced an uncertain future at the hands of this peculiar commander. Still, he was

not quite the heartless, barbaric Hun that the papers back home led one to believe. He'd been warned that the Boche would offer no quarter: Teutonic cruelty and savagery was well known. Yet, there was something altogether sympathetic about von Luckner's character. He had looked on with clear empathy as Shewan watched his ship go down, and now he escorted him to his cabin with a sort of gentleness that was wholly out of keeping with an adversary. He was also at pains to let Shewan know that he and his crew would receive full financial compensation for the duration of their imprisonment.

Von Luckner laid down a couple of ground rules: Shewan and his men would have the freedom of the ship, but must stay away from the weapons and also the wireless and helm. Other than that, he hoped they had a happy voyage. It was strange … nothing was quite as Shewan expected, least of all his quarters, which were more comfortable than his own on *Gladys Royle*. 'Only me?' he enquired, bewildered. 'Indeed,' replied von Luckner. 'At least … for now,' he added with a grin.[2]

In fact, Captain Shewan would have only one day alone. The *Seeadler*'s instructions had been to take only sailing ships, but the experiment with the *Gladys Royle* convinced von Luckner and his crew that they were more than a match for any steamship, provided they took the right approach. It was also clear that they were in a happy hunting ground, although von Luckner was compelled to let his next potential prize slip by, as she was a passenger ship, and to accommodate so many 'guests' aboard *Seeadler* would have been a genuine headache. The decision was therefore taken to let her carry on her way. Yet at 9am, a fresh prize presented itself to the raiders: a big steamer, evidently homeward bound and running at seven or eight knots. As the *Seeadler* closed with her it

was clear that she was the British ship *Lundy Island*, a big cargo steamer and an ideal target.

All aboard the *Seeadler* prepared for action; the auxiliary engines were fired up and a course shaped to intercept the hurrying steamer. According to von Luckner, the *Lundy Island* refused to stop and came within an ace of ramming the *Seeadler*. This, however, does not tally with the *Lundy Island*'s official account. According to her captain, David Barton, after the usual pleasantries had been exchanged by flag, the *Seeadler* revealed her true colours and fired two shots across the stern of the *Lundy Island*. Barton immediately realised that he was under attack and ordered increased speed in a desperate attempt to escape. Heading up into the wind, he ran for 45 minutes while the raider bombarded her with a total of 31 shells, scoring three direct hits. Finally one hit the *Lundy Island* where it really hurt, disabling her rudder. At this point, Captain Barton headed down below to burn his confidential papers, and when he returned on deck, he was disgusted to discover that his loyal crew had taken to the boats, leaving him alone on board.[3]

Von Luckner certainly had no great wish for bloodshed. His efforts throughout his raiding were consistent with those of a man who always sought the most peaceful resolution to any confrontation, and there is little doubt that he was dismayed at the lengthy chase of the *Lundy Island* and the repeated shelling. He must also have been perplexed, for, as soon as it was obvious that *Seeadler* had auxiliary engines, it should have been eminently clear to the unarmed *Lundy Island* that she had little chance of escaping. Why had she fled for so long? The answer soon became apparent. As Captain Barton stepped aboard the *Seeadler* with a face like thunder, there was a cry of recognition

from the *Seeadler*'s surgeon, Doctor Pietsch: 'Hello there, Captain Barton!' Barton turned wearily to Pietsch and replied with a heavy sigh, 'Hello, Doctor.'[4]

You may recall that Pietsch had previously served aboard the SMS *Moewe*. The raider that had cut such a dash through the Allied shipping the previous year had captured and sunk Barton's previous ship, the *Corbridge*. Barton had then been held aboard the *Moewe* and released on parole by the Germans on the strict proviso that he took no further active part in the war. Barton had signed a document confirming this, so you can, therefore, imagine his utter horror when he realised that, for the second time in his career, he was being pursued by a German raider.

The chances of that happening had been extremely slim, but now that it had, Barton might have concluded that, given his duplicity, he would be executed by the heartless Hun. This explained his extreme eagerness to escape, and also explained – even if it, perhaps, did not excuse – his crew's somewhat rebellious decision to take to the boats and leave the 'old man' to his fate. There is little doubt that most of them would have preferred a rapid, trouble-free surrender.

Von Luckner soon calmed Barton's fears, telling the worried mariner that serving on a merchant vessel was perfectly acceptable within the stipulations of his parole. A relieved Captain Barton now only had to endure the ordeal of watching the ship under his command sink beneath the waves – the second within the space of a year. He was then free to head below and drown his sorrows with Captain Shewan.

The *Seeadler* proceeded slowly down toward the Equator. She was now operating in the bottleneck between Africa and South America, and, by slowly cruising back and forth across this shipping lane, von Luckner

found his easiest pickings. This was the old windjammer route and the aim was to prey on ships heading north from Cape Horn. It proved to be an extremely happy hunting ground as a succession of windjammers sailed into the *Seeadler*'s path. Between 3 February and 11 March, the *Seeadler* captured and sank nine ships, eight being sailing vessels of various sizes, while the steamship *Horngarth*, captured on 11 March, was the biggest and newest vessel they had captured thus far.

This being von Luckner, there were all manner of amusing asides to accompany each capture. Perhaps the cruellest involved the capture of the Canadian three-masted schooner *Perce*, which so nearly slipped the net. It so happened that the captain of the *Perce* was recently married and was loath to leave his bride, Eva, ashore. The new Mrs Kohler was also keen to spend as much time with her husband as possible, so it was decided that she would take a honeymoon trip aboard the *Perce*. On 24 January, the *Seeadler* hove into sight and approached, signalling frantically. For unknown reasons, Captain Carl Kohler of the *Perce* did not bother to reply, even after the *Seeadler* had hove-to and dipped her flag a further three times. It was a common courtesy of the sea to reply in kind in these circumstances, but still the *Perce* ploughed sedulously on.

Aboard the *Seeadler* there was dismay; without knowing the nationality of a vessel, any attack was fraught with risk. If a ship they attacked turned out to be neutral, they would have no choice but to allow her to proceed and, in time – or very rapidly, if she had a wireless – their secret would be betrayed.

There was much discussion on board about the schooner. The *Perce* was a wooden three-masted vessel of the type favoured by the Americans, who were still neutral at this point in the war. Given that she refused to show her colours and was a fairly mediocre prize anyway, the decision

was taken to just let her go and the *Seeadler* sheered away, proceeding on her voyage.

Aboard the *Perce*, however, there were domestic problems. Captain Kohler's fair wife was unimpressed with her new husband's lack of etiquette and remonstrated with him over his slovenly attitude to the friendly Norwegian ship. In an effort to appease his wife, the British flag was belatedly raised, and several hours later the *Perce* slid into a watery grave. Von Luckner was kind enough to offer man and wife their own stateroom in order to allow them to make peace at their own leisure over this small matter of flag etiquette. Mrs Kohler was later joined by the wife of the captain of the *British Yeoman* when that ship was captured and sunk just over a month later.

On 3 February a sail was spotted on the horizon. It turned out to belong to the French four-masted barque *Antonin*. Attempts were made to start the engine in preparation for attack, but the motor was becoming increasingly truculent as the voyage went on – in part because of the very low quality of oil that the German Imperial Navy had begrudged her. Von Luckner believed that a section of the Admiralty had been highly sceptical about the efficacy of sending a sailing ship out raiding, and the result had been a certain skimping on the quality of fuel. As a result of the defective engine, the pursuit turned into a supposedly friendly race under sail, with the *Seeadler* chasing hard, but barely gaining on her rival.

It was a picturesque scene as these two tall ships raced down the southern Atlantic before a fresh breeze. Then everything changed as a squall struck and the prudent Frenchman clewed up his royal and topgallant sails, still tearing before the wind-whipped waves under reduced canvas. To the surprise of all aboard the *Antonin*, the *Seeadler*

raced on under all sail, now gaining rapidly. She made a fine sight as she drove on, smashing aside the feathery whitecaps, a great white bone in her teeth as she heeled over, her figurehead curtseying to the huge blue Atlantic rollers. Up above, every sail was curved and stretched full with the power of the wind that drove her through laughing seas.

Sailors are a rough and ready lot, but they are also incurable romantics and know beauty when they see it. The skipper of the *Antonin* was much moved by the captivating scene, and he decided to set up his camera on the poop in order to get a photo of the *Seeadler* as she sped by. On the deck of the raider, von Luckner spotted what was going on and ordered his men to hold their fire while the photograph was taken. Once the French skipper had got his shot, he was repaid in harder currency, being given a rude awakening as, above the roar of the wind and the hiss of the spray, the rattle of machine-gun fire cut through his reverie. Bullets sliced through rigging and sails until he got the message and hove-to.

The *Antonin* was one of four French windjammers to be sent to a watery grave, the others being the *Charles Gounod* on 21 January, *La Roche Jacquet* on 27 February and the *Dupleix* on 5 March. The encounter with the *Dupleix* occurred in darkness, and von Luckner describes it most poetically as follows:

> *It is a wonderful tropical night. The merry band of corsairs sits together amid the spoils of their plundering sipping on champagne. The moon smiles down on us, the waves mutter around the bow. The sails are full. The band on the cello, the violin, the harmonium and the Steinway grand piano plays the song 'Oh, Dear South Wind', while the south wind breathes on us.*

*We enjoyed the night because we did not know what would happen to us the next few days; we may be at the bottom of the sea in our poorly armed raider. Yet we feel good, because our consciences are free. It is true that man is in the world to make others good, and we have robbed ships. Yet we are suddenly torn out of this joyous attitude, when the lookout calls, 'Light to starboard.'*

*'Hi, hi a light! Get the glasses, the eyeglass in your hand!' There on the horizon, brightly illuminated by moonlight, is a proud three-master. Hard starboard! We turn towards her. We ourselves cannot be recognised, since we are on the dark side of the horizon. We transmit the following signal by lamp:*

*'Heave-to, big German cruiser.'*

*We are waiting at the rail to see what will come. Presently we hear the splashing of oars, and from the darkness comes a boat from which a voice is calling:*

*'Hello, Captain, I thought I had a Hun cruiser in front of me and now I see a comrade, a fellow sailor. Why did you give me such a fright? You want to tell me something about the war?'*

*'Of course, come up, we have a lot of news!'*

*We had taken off our white uniform jackets so that the captain did not see our badges, and we greet him in shirt sleeves. The captain comes aboard and greets us by proudly stating, 'I am French.'*

*'Oh, great! How is France doing?'*

*'France! She is victorious or will be very soon.* Ravi de vous voir.'

*We invite him to enjoy a glass of champagne with us, which he takes enthusiastically. Being homeward bound, he is in a frolicsome mood as he is on his way home. As we descend the companionway steps, he slaps me on the back with the words:*

*'Captain, you're a horrible fellow, you fooled me like that. But now I feel as if a great weight has fallen from my heart.'*

*Well, I think, that weight is about to return – for only a wall separated him from the room where everything would be revealed to him.*

*He steps into the door of the cabin and bounces back as he sees Hindenburg's picture on the wall; he crumples slightly and exclaims, groaning, 'Germans!'*[5]

There is, incidentally, plenty of anecdotal evidence from captured skippers that the *Seeadler* did indeed have a band aboard, although whether there was actually a Steinway grand piano as part of the ensemble has never been conclusively proven one way or the other.

You may be wondering what, if anything, the British Admiralty back in London were making of the *Seeadler*'s shenanigans. The truth is, very little; at this moment, all was supposition. Certainly rumours were afoot – the confusing incident involving the *Hero* had been reported, for one thing. Meanwhile, the failure of vessels such as the *Gladys Royle* to arrive, despite relatively benign conditions, all pointed to a raider being on the loose. The Admiralty trained its eyes on the Atlantic and sought out the enemy. Yet, for now, they drew a blank. So they watched and waited – almost willing the raider to reveal herself.

On 11 March 1917 the British ship *Horngarth* is steaming at a leisurely seven knots back to Blighty after loading a cargo of maize in Montevideo. She's a smart new ship, just six years old and carrying a plethora of modern gizmos, including a wireless. What's more, perched on her foredeck, in pride of place, is a five-inch gun. The *Horngarth* is a fine enough ship to

merit being hired by the British Admiralty, not only to defend herself, but also to attack raiders and U-boats.

The gunnery officer is itching to use his new toy and officers and captain view the gun with pride as they survey the horizon. Not that they expect to see much action out here in the middle of the Atlantic, other than the odd ship. In fact, they have been keeping their eye on one for most of the day – evidently an old windjammer on a course gradually converging with their own.

At 3.20pm, Captain Stainthorp is summoned urgently to the bridge. The lookout reports that he can see great billows of smoke issuing from the windjammer, which is also signalling them frantically. Captain Stainthorp orders full steam ahead; the *Horngarth*'s engines throb and her powerful propeller threshes the ocean as they race over to the stricken ship. Every second counts if they are to save this unfortunate vessel, and as they approach her, their desire to help intensifies as they spot a tall, blonde woman – probably the captain's wife – racing around the deck in a state of extreme panic. It seems odd that the windjammer's boats haven't been lowered, but they aim to get close to her and stand by to assist.

The *Horngarth* pulls alongside the windjammer and comes to a standstill, rolling gently in the swell. 'What the hell is the matter with you?' Stainthorp cries through his megaphone. Even as he does so, the British flag comes down and is replaced by the German one. The deck is suddenly swarming with uniformed men armed with Mausers, and machine guns are trained directly at the *Horngarth*. Captain Stainthorp's eyes bulge in disbelief. It's like some sort of nightmare unfolding in front of him, but he immediately telegraphs 'full steam ahead' as a shot whistles across their stern. The next moment, all is chaos as machine guns chatter

and the raider's gun comes to bear on her target. Almost immediately there is a violent report forward as the wireless hut takes a direct hit. Stainthorp orders men forward to his own gun, but they are held at bay by relentless rounds of machine-gun fire clattering over the foredeck.

Meanwhile the raider's four-inch gun proceeds to pour hell into the hull of the *Horngarth*. Her steel plates cannot stand such a sustained close-range pounding for long, and within minutes the engineers come sprinting up on deck, yelling that the boiler has taken a direct hit and is blowing off steam. Still Stainthorp hesitates; it would take only one man to fire their own gun and finish off the windjammer. It's a tense moment, and he wrestles with the choice of meek surrender, death or glory. As he struggles to make a decision, there is a lull in the shelling and he hears the order 'Stand by to torpedo.' Stainthorp knows he's beaten and orders a white sheet run up. They can do nothing against torpedoes.

The surrender should be complete, but the *Horngarth*'s engine room is now absolutely lethal, with the boiler threatening to explode at any moment. There's no way of getting down there to cut the engine, so the *Horngarth* careers about, out of control. The *Seeadler*, having ceased firing, now begins again as the steamer takes a wide, out-of-control arc around her. The *Seeadler* scores another direct hit that blows the *Horngarth*'s lifeboat to smithereens before von Luckner realises what is going on and his guns fall silent.

Eventually the *Horngarth* is slowed and the battle is over. Stainthorp later discovers to his chagrin that the *Seeadler* has no torpedoes, while the 'fire' onboard was carefully staged using smoke bombs.

The *Horngarth* was the biggest prize the *Seeadler* had captured so far, but the jubilation was short lived when it was found that the action had

claimed the raiding expedition's first life: Richard Page, a youngster of just 16, had been badly injured when the wireless station was hit and, despite the efforts of Doctor Pietsch, died later that evening. It marred what would otherwise have been another dramatic and colourful tale for von Luckner to retell. Nevertheless, the youngster was to be the only casualty of the cruise. Considering that her fellow German raider the *Moewe* racked up 11 casualties in an encounter with SS *Otaki* – an armed merchantman similar to the *Horngarth* – it's plain how successful the *Seeadler*'s mission was.

This single fatality aside, the *Seeadler*'s attacks on enemy ships were bloodless, often good-humoured events that, in the hands of von Luckner's fertile imagination, became pure poetry. Von Luckner was not only a man of honour, he was also an incurable romantic and – perhaps above all else – a teller of tales. To spin a yarn was his delight and it was sometimes hard to gauge exactly where fact ended and a rather splendid flight of fantasy began. Naval records help with this, and the fact that prizes were photographed prior to sinking certainly proves certain claims beyond doubt. Yet von Luckner still managed to squeeze in some artistic flourish into the story of almost any capture. After the war, von Luckner narrated his remarkable story with one eye to book sales and embellishing his reputation. His beloved fatherland was in financial ruin and his own salvation lay in his celebrity. He already had on his hands a truly remarkable yarn, but he certainly wasn't afraid to throw in a few extras along the way.

The destruction of the *Pinmore* is a case in point. The *Pinmore* was a four-masted barque captured by the *Seeadler* on 9 February and subsequently sunk. There is photographic evidence to back this up. Yet, from this point on, it becomes very hard to determine where fact ends and

fiction begins. The *Pinmore* was an interesting ship in her own right and worthy of a few tall tales herself. Built in 1882 as a four-masted ship, she had rapidly gained a name for being remarkably fast – she was no clipper in terms of her design, but some of her passages were not far off clipper-ship performances; her 96-day run from San Francisco to Queenstown (now Cobh) was only a few days off the clipper-ship record of 87 days, set way back in 1861.

Despite her excellent speed, the *Pinmore*'s greatest claim to fame – before von Luckner encountered her – was a bizarre incident that occurred in 1901, while on passage from Mexico to Portland, Oregon. During that journey she was hit by a squall, which shifted her cargo and left her almost on her beam ends. She did not look long for this world, and, in a panic, the crew abandoned her and took to the boats. After several trying days, they were picked up by a steamer, which deposited them in Astoria. As their rescuers steamed into Astoria, all aboard were baffled to see a large four-masted barque swinging serenely to her anchor. It was their very own *Pinmore*. It turned out that she hadn't sunk and instead had been spotted and salvaged. To add insult to injury, when the *Pinmore*'s crew returned aboard they found that the salvage crew had stolen all of their belongings.[6]

The old *Pinmore* had enjoyed a colourful existence as it was, but in the hands of von Luckner, her story was about to become positively luminescent. The following year in 1902 – presumably with the skipper replaced by someone with a slightly calmer disposition – a new crew member had joined the ship – a certain Phelax Leudicke. According to von Luckner, he spent 285 miserable days aboard the ship as she made a horrendously long passage from San Francisco to Liverpool around Cape Horn. Inevitably, supplies ran low and the ship limped into port

with the crew crippled with scurvy and beri-beri. Six men died on this terrible trip. In a remarkable twist of fate, this same ship was now in the *Seeadler*'s sights.

Initially, when the *Seeadler* had revealed its true colours, the *Pinmore*'s skipper, Captain Mullen, had tried to outrun her. Mullen had served on the *Pinmore* for over a decade and knew his ship was likely to be faster than the *Seeadler*. 'Let's give the Germans a run for their money,' he had commented coolly to the mate. Yet, when it became evident that the *Seeadler* had a motor and was also not afraid to loose a few shots into the rigging of the *Pinmore*, Mullen was forced to condede defeat. 'I did so with the greatest reluctance,' Mullen later recalled. 'But there was no use in jeopardising the lives of my men as we were right under the raider's guns.'[7]

Mullen was fond of the old *Pinmore*, and it soon became clear that von Luckner was too. There is no question that he loved sailing ships, and it pained him to be an agent of their destruction. Having served aboard the *Pinmore*, he felt even worse, and once the crew had been taken off, he opted to go aboard and reminisce about his time aboard her.

'Finding myself aboard her seemed like returning home after a long absence,' he recalled. 'I went aft and found my initials G.v.L [Graf von Luckner] where I had scratched them on the rail of the steering wheel, while in my old quarters was the screw hook in the ceiling placed there to hold a tin against a leaky roof.'[8]

Doubtless he was pondering that epic 285-day passage he had made aboard her. Except that this particular passage never happened. The records for 1902 reveal that the *Pinmore* did indeed make a passage around Cape Horn, but that she ran from Tacoma to Queenstown in the respectable time of 122 days.[9] Was Phelax Leudicke aboard? It's hard to say.

The intrigue doesn't end there, because in an earlier version of the *Pinmore*'s capture, the *Pinmore* is stopped and then von Luckner, in need of some extra supplies, sails her into Rio de Janeiro, where he poses as Captain Mullen, loads up £900 worth of supplies, and then returns to a prearranged rendezvous with the *Seeadler*. Did it really happen? It could have, for almost anything is possible when it comes to von Luckner, but it would have been an insanely risky gambit. Captain Mullen had been in charge of the *Pinmore* since 1905 and was well known in shipping circles. Moreover, Rio was a busy port crammed with shipping. It would have taken only one person to spot that 'Mullen' was an imposter and the jig would have been up. Von Luckner was a man who enjoyed risk, but such an act would have been risk almost for the sake of it.

Even von Luckner's flowery account of his visit aboard the old ship is contradicted by newspaper reports written using Captain Mullen's recollections of events. In Mullen's account, a prize officer simply comes over and informs him that he has to leave because his ship is about to be sunk. On boarding the *Seeadler*, he is greeted by von Luckner, who asks him, 'Why did you not stop?'[10] There is no mention of von Luckner going aboard the *Pinmore*, and, given that Mullen never alluded to von Luckner serving aboard his ship at any time, it seems highly unlikely that he did. The one absolute certainty is that the *Pinmore* was encountered and sunk, and that poor Captain Mullen lost his ship, which, by that time, was one of the fastest windjammers left afloat. This was something that definitely bothered von Luckner: fantasist or otherwise, he loved tall ships and mourned their passing, just as all seafaring men did.

There was to be one sailing ship that eluded the *Seeadler* during this incredibly destructive – or productive – period of raiding, and that was the Danish four-masted barque, the *Viking*. She was hurrying northward when

the *Seeadler* spotted her and tried her usual tricks. The big barque resolutely ignored her until the *Seeadler* sent a shot across her bows in preparation for a full-blown attack. At that point, she hoisted her Danish flag. This was a disaster, as it meant that von Luckner had finally shown his hand to a neutral vessel and, given that he could not capture her, it was now only a matter of time before his secret was out. In desperation, he sent a boarding party across to the *Viking* and checked her papers, but there were no two ways about it; she was Danish.

The only blessing was that the *Viking* carried no wireless, meaning it could take several weeks before their secret was betrayed. In the meantime, the crew of the *Seeadler* could only stand back and watch as the *Viking* filled her main yard and slowly gathered way on her course once more.

The old ship made the most of her escape from destruction and went on to outlive all of her contemporaries, taking part in the last grain race in 1938–9 – essentially the last truly commercial tall ship race – and continuing to sail throughout World War II. She can still be seen today in Gothenburg, where she serves as a tourist attraction and floating hotel.

Her departure was bad news for von Luckner, who knew he now had to leave that happy hunting ground within a matter of weeks. It was time to go in search of pastures new if he was to continue his mission successfully.

# 8
# THE CAPTAIN'S CLUB

On 12 March, the remains of Richard Page of the *Horngarth* were committed to the deep with full honours, a Union Jack wrapped around his coffin. Von Luckner himself led the sermon. All were moved by the tragic loss, and the captives could not help but feel a great surge of gratitude and respect to their captor – so clearly upset by the death of the lad, and also at such great pains to carry out a respectful send-off for this latest casualty of the war.

E H Davis, a sailor captured from the *British Yeoman*, describes the service as follows: 'The raider was stopped, the British flag covering his canvas shroud, and the band playing the Dead March. The burial service was held and he was committed to the deep. The count himself performed the ceremony and all could see that he was deeply grieved.'

Most of the captives had to admit that life aboard a German raider was far from what they had been led to expect, and when they later spoke to the press, they almost always felt moved to stress that this was the case. This must have served as an irritant to the Allied propaganda machine, which had been mightily effective in propagating the general belief that the Hun was really little more than a savage dressed up in uniform.

The contrast between these popular portrayals and the aristocratic, good-humoured and deeply civilised von Luckner was confusing. Yet there was more to it than that. Von Luckner was a jovial man who was most at home in the company of sailors. He was also sociable and loved nothing better than a few drinks, perhaps a cigar, and a good yarn. Aboard the *Seeadler* he had a captive audience, which he treated royally.

While all the prisoners were well looked after, von Luckner formed a 'Captain's Club' made up of all the skippers, who enjoyed a rare old time of it, often dining on generous meals in the evening washed down with champagne or fine wine, while in the background, the ship's band tinkled away mellifluously. Von Luckner, knowing the British love of 'It's A Long Way To Tipperary', often asked for this to be played, and it always went down well. Indeed, many found it difficult to resist the urge to become friends with the dashing young officer who had sunk their ship, yet subsequently shown them such charm and humanity.

Captain Mullen of the *Pinmore* had won von Luckner's respect right from the start. He was a veteran sailor who had stuck with tall ships when many had shifted to steam. Von Luckner had also been impressed with his pluck in trying to sail away from the *Seeadler* to escape her guns. He saw the hopeless gallantry of this act and respected him for it. The feeling was evidently mutual, as Mullen later recalled: 'He was a true sport and treated us all fair and square. He played the game throughout. We were treated with the utmost courtesy throughout and allowed the run of the ship and the free use of the stores.'[1]

The policy aboard the *Seeadler* was to appeal to the captives' decency and trust this to deliver a peaceful and happy ship – and, by and large, it worked. It also helped that each ship captured replenished the stock of supplies nicely. The *Charles Gounod* had a pair of fat hogs and an

excellent supply of red wine, while the *British Yeoman*'s pigs and chickens were a big hit on the dinner table. Along with the extra supplies came additional cooks, so the *Seeadler* enjoyed the finest offerings from the French chefs, while the arrival of an Italian cook from the Italian ship *Buenos Aires* added yet more variation.

Meanwhile, the crew of the *Seeadler* decided it was only right that they took on the *British Yeoman*'s pet rabbit and pigeon, an inseparable pair that were adopted by Piperle, one of the *Seeadler*'s pair of pet dachshunds. The *British Yeoman* had further lightened the mood aboard, with the captain's wife providing some much-needed female companionship for Mrs Kohler of the *Perce*. Von Luckner was so concerned that the new female arrival would be scared that he requested that Mrs Kohler be there at the gangplank, a bouquet of paper flowers in her hand, to reassure her when she arrived aboard.

At some point in the cruise, the Germans got hold of a large consignment of champagne and cognac. Von Luckner claimed that this had been part of the *Horngarth*'s cargo, but there is no evidence of this from her bills of lading. Nevertheless, there are photographs of the *Seeadler*'s officers posing with a huge array of champagne, and frequent references were made throughout the cruise to this booze; von Luckner clearly did not stint on the alcohol. While the prizes continued to plunge to the bottom of the ocean, all aboard the *Seeadler* enjoyed the fruits of their labour.

For the most part, von Luckner had very little trouble from his captives. He also stated that his offer of a bottle of champagne for anyone sighting a ship was extended to his prisoners, and – at least, according to von Luckner – some were as assiduous as the crew when it came to searching out new victims, as the count observed: 'The prisoners seemed to appreciate our intentions thoroughly. They wanted to do everything they could for us in return. Feelings of patriotism should have made

them hope for our early destruction, but more elemental sentiments of gratitude and friendship obliterated the artificial passions of war hatred. I think it really hurt them to think that the day probably would come when we would be caught and go down under a rain of Allied shell fire.'[2]

Despite this apparently genuine atmosphere of bonhomie, as the number of captives swelled with each vessel sunk, the Germans must have feared that they might end up being overpowered by sheer force of numbers. As a precaution, von Luckner circulated the story that the *Seeadler* carried cans of poisonous gases linked to the prisoners' accommodation, meaning that if there was any trouble, all prisoners would be asphyxiated at the push of a button. In actual fact, no such device was present, but von Luckner worked very hard to spread misinformation among his prisoners, aware that, at some point, he would have to let them go. His crew was therefore encouraged to socialise with the prisoners, but also to drop in erroneous information about their planned destination and other details about the armament of the ship. The captives were also frequently told how badly the Allied war effort was going and informed that Russia had withdrawn from the conflict.

The only real difficulties von Luckner encountered were from his French captives. Reading through von Luckner's own reminiscences on the cruise, it is clear that, while he certainly felt a sort of warmth and brotherhood towards his fellow British skippers – particularly Mullen of the *Pinmore* – he struggled with his French counterparts, and evidently found them a little bit prickly to deal with. Von Luckner did try to empathise, however, observing, 'One must understand the French: it is always very painful for him to leave his ship with which he is united by a special love of home.' As von Luckner noted of Captain Rault after the *Charles Gounod* was taken, 'The captain impressed me exceedingly, not

only by his high education, but above all by the sincerity with which he made it clear that he was our enemy. He behaved embarrassingly correctly, respectful of the enemy, but avoided the slightest hint of an approach.'[3]

Although Rault of the *Charles Gounod* 'scrupulously kept up his manner of cold politeness and stately hostility', even he thawed a degree or two according to von Luckner. It was Le Coq of *La Rochefoucauld* who caused the only real trouble experienced on the whole voyage. Von Luckner had made it clear that he did not want any of his guests to know the exact location of the magazine for the four-inch gun forward. This made perfect sense since a direct hit on the magazine of a ship can destroy it with a single shot, as Von Luckner had seen for himself at Jutland. He was therefore outraged when Le Coq was discovered snooping around in this area, and further infuriated when rough plans of the *Seeadler* showing her general layout were found secreted upon his person. There is no question that von Luckner was a gentleman and a man of honour. In his mind, there was nothing more repellent than someone going back on their word, and he informed Le Coq that when the rest of his captives were released, he alone would remain behind.

The day of release was looming fast for the prisoners. After the capture of the *Horngarth*, there were 283 prisoners and crew aboard in total, and conditions were becoming somewhat uncomfortable. All the while, von Luckner and his officers were aware that the encounter with the *Viking* had set the clock ticking against them. So far, the vastness of the Atlantic had ensured that they had escaped the roving eye of the Admiralty. Yet, the moment the *Viking* arrived in Denmark, the *Seeadler*'s secret would be revealed and the Royal Navy spurred into action. Even as they dallied in the Atlantic, von Luckner must have been aware of the risk that the *Viking* might have already encountered a vessel with a wireless and spread

the word. Even as they waited, British warships could be on their way to destroy them. It was time for von Luckner to show his hand. He therefore began to head south from around the Equator, and when he fell in with the French ship the *Cambronne*, he decided it was time to act.

Upon being captured, the skipper of the *Cambronne* was brought aboard, and in a ritual all on the *Seeadler* were now getting used to, he begged for clemency and for his ship to be spared. To his immense relief and surprise, von Luckner promptly told him that he was not going to sink his ship and that he intended to use the vessel to land his prisoners at Rio de Janeiro. There was a sting in the tail for the Frenchman though, for von Luckner stipulated that Captain Mullen be placed in charge of the French ship, which, for the duration of her short voyage, would fly the British red ensign. To the French skippers this was almost too much to bear, and there was much wailing and gnashing of teeth. Yet von Luckner stood firm and argued that he trusted Mullen above all others and that they had to respect his decision. Meanwhile, the *Seeadler*'s crew was busy aboard the *Cambronne*, removing her upper masts and yards and jettisoning many of her sails. This was to ensure the French windjammer made exceptionally slow time on her voyage to Rio. Von Luckner estimated it would take the *Cambronne* eight days with her reduced sail plan, and he was going to need all that time to slip the net that would rapidly close around him once the *Seeadler*'s presence was known to the British.

Von Luckner gathered his prisoners of war and wished them all the best and a safe voyage. He had a transcript of the funeral service for Richard Page typed out and stipulated that this should be sent to the parents of the young man. From his substantial stash of German marks, von Luckner also ensured that every single man was paid the equivalent of his wage aboard his own ship for the period of his imprisonment. It was

a typically generous gesture that was rejected by only one man, a Belgian steward from the *Lundy Island*, who refused the money and was informed that he would therefore remain aboard the *Seeadler* for what was deemed an act of gross insubordination. Despite his previous scheming, Le Coq of the *Rochefoucauld* was allowed to leave, and the *Cambronne* and the *Seeadler* parted amid cheers of farewell, with the *Seeadler* heading east – apparently in the direction of the Cape of Good Hope.

Nine days later, on 31 March 1917 – the first day of the battle of Ypres – the *Cambronne* arrived in Rio de Janeiro and created a huge stir. She presented a fairly arresting sight with her upper yards cut away and almost 300 refugees crowding her rail. By the time her dramatic story had been told, and retold a thousand times and more, she was a minor sensation. Soon the incredible story of the *Seeadler* was being broadcast all around the world. The following report in the *Sunday Oregonian*, 1 April 1917, is typical of the tone and confusion that reigned. It's also worth noting the aggrieved tone of the French captains, which contrasted sharply with the testimony of British skippers such as Captain Mullen.

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## 11 SHIPS SUNK OFF BRAZIL BY GERMAN

**British Blockade Run by New Raider.**

## CRAFT AS DARING AS MOEWE

**Several Americans Among Survivors at Rio Janeiro.**

## ONE VESSEL GIVES BATTLE

**British Steamer *Horngarth* Is Sent Down After Stiff Fight.**

**Raider Said to Be Captured American.**

**Norwegian Flag Is Flown.**

RIO JANEIRO, March 31. A new German raider, slipping past the British warships on guard in the North Sea, has reached the South Atlantic and sent 11 merchantmen to the bottom. According to survivors from the sunken vessels, the raider is the *Seeadler* (Sea Eagle), a formidably armed craft operating with the same success and daring as its predecessor, the *Moewe*, which recently returned to a German port after playing havoc with shipping in the same waters. News of the activities of the raider was brought to Rio Janeiro by the French bark *Cambronne*, which arrived here yesterday. She had on board 285 men, several of them Americans, from the crews of vessels sunk by the *Seeadler*.

**Survivors Put on Captive**

The *Cambronne* encountered the raider March 7 at latitude 21 south, longitude 7 west, a point in the Atlantic almost on a line with Rio Janeiro and about two-thirds of the way to the African coast. After the survivors had been put on the *Cambronne*, she was allowed to proceed to the coast of Brazil, a voyage of 22 days. According to the *Journal Du Brazil*, the raider was loaded with mines, which explains the destruction of vessels off the coast of Brazil. The commerce destroyer is reported to be armed with two guns of 105 millimeters and 16 machine guns. The vessel has three masts and is equipped with wireless. Its crew consists of 64 men under the command of Count Luckner.

### Raider Under Norwegian Flag

According to the refugees, the raider left Germany December 22, escorted by a submarine. On sighting a merchantman, the raider hoisted a Norwegian flag, which was replaced by the German ensign when her prey was within reach of her guns. Among the refugees are two women, the wives of two of the captains of the sunken vessels. Among the ships sunk by the raider are the following: *Antonin*, French sailing vessel, 3071 tons, owned in Dunkirk, 31 men on board. *British Yeoman*, British sailing vessel, 1953 tons, owned in Victoria, B.C, 21 men. *Buenos Aires*, Italian sailing vessel, 1811 tons, owned in Naples, 21 men.

### Charles Gounod One Victim

*Charles Gounod*, French sailing vessel, 2159 tons, owned in Nantes, 24 men. *Dupleix*, French sailing vessel, 2206 tons, owned in Nantes, 22 men. *Gladys Royal* [*sic*], British ship, 3269 tons, owned in Sunderland, 26 men. *Hongarth* [*sic*], British, 3600 tons gross, owned in Cardiff. *Lundy Island* (or *Landy Island*), 4500 tons, 25 men, (not listed). *La Rochefoucauld*, French sailing vessel, 2200 tons, owned in Nantes, 24 men. *Perce*, British schooner, 364 tons, owned in Halifax, six men, one woman. *Pinmore*, British sailing vessel, 2431 tons, owned in Greenock, 29 men.

The steamer *Lady Island* [*sic*] was hit by 73 shells from the guns of the raider. After releasing the *Cambronne* the raider departed in a southerly direction, while its band

played 'Deutschland Uber Alles'. Anolte says the *Charles Gounod* was destroyed by bombs, and that the schooner *Perce* was struck by 46 shells. The French sailing vessel *Dupleix*, it adds, met the raider at 11 o'clock at night, was chased and finally sunk at 7 o'clock in the morning.

**Smoke Screen Used**

The *Jornal do Commercio* says the raider was able to conceal herself by the use of smoke screen. The thoroughness with which the Germans carried on their work of destruction is shown by their treatment of the *Cambronne*. On deciding to send this vessel to Brazil with their prisoners, they cut away part of her masts and destroyed some of her sails, with the idea of delaying her progress to Brazil and keeping secret as long as possible the presence of the raider in the South Atlantic. All papers on the *Cambronne* were seized and a large part of her cargo was destroyed. The survivors who have reached here can give no definite account of the movements of the *Seeadler*, although they say that most of the vessels were sunk off the Brazilian coast. The *Horngarth* put up the stiffest fight. It required 21 cannon shot, fired from a distance of two and one-half miles, to sink her. The *Charles Gounod* was the first ship sunk. Her captain gave the following account of his experiences: 'When we first sighted the raider she was flying the Norwegian flag. We learned of her intentions when she opened fire with machine guns, shooting our sails. We hove-to and the raider launched a whaleboat equipped with a motor.'

### Ill Treatment Charged

'Before the Germans had reached us we destroyed all the ship's papers. A Junior German officer boarded us and declared our vessel to be a prize of war.' The captain of the *Dupleix* said, 'In spite of the fact that I was ill, I was treated with no consideration by the Germans. For two hours German sailors pillaged my ship. Then we were all sent to the *Seeadler* in our own small boats. These boats were then sunk and the *Dupleix* was destroyed by bombs. We met the raider at latitude 1:10 north, longitude 28:12 west (in the mid Atlantic, about on a line with the mouth of the Amazon). We were kept prisoner on the *Seeadler* from March 5 to March 21. Before leaving the raider we were compelled to promise that we would not engage in any act of war during the remaining period of hostilities.' The raider is equipped with a powerful wireless plant. The apparatus is concealed skilfully in the rigging. The survivors say it is impossible to recognise the raider as an armed ship. When she left Germany her guns were concealed in the hold while she was running the British blockade.

### Gasoline Launches Carried

The *Seeadler* has two gasoline launches, which also were hidden in the hold during the first part of the voyage. After the *Seeadler* was on the high seas her guns were mounted. They were placed on the forecastle and the gun ports were masked. On account of the position of the guns they can be fired in only two directions. The survivors describe the

*Seeadler* as a square-rigged three-master of about 2800 tons, and a speed of 12 knots. Her commander presented to the captain of each ship he sank an engraved certificate, setting forth the circumstances under which the vessel was destroyed. The names of the American citizens from the crews of sunken vessels brought in by the *Cambronne* so far as is known are as follows: Roy Clark, of Virginia, from the British sailing vessel *British Yeoman*. John Rondonl, of California, from the *British Yeoman*. Luther Letters, of Ohio, from the British sailing vessel *Pinmore*. Ernest Ray Gilbert, of Washington, from the *Pinmore*. Manuel Guerrero, of Manila (no ship given). For the most part the Germans compensated the prisoners for their services. A remarkable case was that of a Hollander. This man was assigned to work in the galley. At the end of his stay on the raider his German captors handed him 160 marks in German paper money for his work. He refused the payment with a gesture of disdain. He was at once arrested and is now a prisoner on the *Seeadler*, the only member of the captured crews who was not given his liberty, it is said. Life passed pleasantly on board the raider, the released men report.

**Band Plays Frequently**

The sailors had a band which played frequently and enthusiastically when the men were off duty. Their orchestra was composed of three mandolins, three violins, a flute and a bass drum. Although the survivors say the Germans did not mistreat them, they report that their captors invented

fantastic tales regarding the war to put them out of sorts. One of their favourite stories was that France was about to be overwhelmed by an avalanche of 6,000,000 Germans. They also frequently announced that Russia had been dismembered.

The *Buenos Aires* was halted just before the fight with the *Hongarth* [*sic*] occurred. The raider compelled the *Buenos Aires* to pass back and forth over an indicated course while the *Hongarth* was being disposed of. In spite of the expressed desire of the raider's officers not to shed blood, the *Seeadler* did not hesitate to turn loose her machine guns on the decks and on the bridges of any vessel she was capturing if there were signs of the ship not surrendering at once. In such an action as this a British sailor was seriously injured, his eye being put out. An operation was performed on board the raider, but the man died under the knife.

**Raider Thought American**

The daily consumption of gasoline by the *Seeadler*'s engines is five barrels. She carried a supply of 1200 barrels, the refugees report. It is reported here that the German raider is the captured American bark *Pass of Balmaha*.

These rather wild stories emerging from Rio were corroborated by the *Viking*, which had arrived in Copenhagen and described her boarding by *Hero* to the local authorities in Denmark, information which soon found its way into the hands of the Allies. The British Admiralty combed through their records and pinpointed the precise moment the ship had

slipped through their net. They now had a pretty strong idea of where she was, and all that remained was to hunt her down.

Back in Germany, news was also filtering through to the families whose loved ones had been seemingly swallowed up by the Atlantic. The German Admiralty had been as much in the dark as anyone else up until now. Although von Luckner possessed a wireless, radio silence had been maintained for security. Finally there was news. Not only that, but the Germans had a real propaganda coup on their hands. An old windjammer had taken on all comers and succeeded – here was something for the hard-pressed and extremely hungry populace of Germany to smile about. For families of the missing crew members, the news was a welcome relief. They were safe and well – for now at least.

Back in the Atlantic, the *Seeadler* continued to plunge south, with her crew enjoying the sudden feeling of space afforded by the mass departure. A freshness came to the salty air that pressed them onward with a new briskness, as if sensing their hurry. The seas, a lambent blue for weeks on end, darkened to a more profound shade of rich indigo – almost purple. After months of drifting around waiting for prey to arrive, this sudden headlong flight south felt good. There was a real sense of urgency aboard and the *Seeadler* was wild and beautiful as she was pushed hard. There was no need for the motor in these conditions as the sails were far more effective. All knew that the Royal Navy had an extensive fleet patrolling the South American coast and would soon be on their tails.

The big question was whether they should head east around the Cape of Good Hope or west around Cape Horn. There were plenty of arguments for and against both options. Once around the Cape of Good Hope, they would find a rich hunting ground in the Indian Ocean, but this was also a

traditional British stronghold and would unquestionably be crawling with British cruisers on the lookout for the raider, whose cover had been well and truly blown. To the west lay the Pacific, which promised a lesser naval presence and plenty of empty spaces in which to disappear. The only problem was what lay between them and the Pacific – namely, Cape Horn. This was a formidable obstacle at any time of year, but with the onset of the southern winter, it often proved to be a killer. They would also be going westabout, against the prevailing easterly winds that roared almost unrestricted around the lonely southern ocean. It was not unknown for a windjammer to spend weeks desperately clawing her way around Cape Horn. The longest passage recorded was a truly epic ten-week battle, endured by the full-rigged ship *British Isles* in 1905. True, the *Seeadler* had her engines, but they were becoming increasingly cranky and would be no match for a Cape Horn storm, where only her sails would have the necessary power to drive her on.

There was another catch to the Cape Horn route: if the Royal Navy guessed right and stationed a number of ships in the area, they stood a strong chance of catching the *Seeadler*. The Southern Ocean was something of a bottleneck in this area, with the Horn itself to the north and the ice fields, and ultimately Antarctica, to the south. It was a reckless and daring strategy. Inevitably, von Luckner shaped a course for Cape Horn, and the *Seeadler* plunged on through darkening seas.

Meanwhile, the Admiralty were also trying to predict von Luckner's next move. It had ships to cover all routes, but where to concentrate its forces? Perhaps everything it had seen of von Luckner so far influenced its decision – somehow the Admiralty just knew he'd go for Cape Horn – and it despatched three ships to intercept the raider: the

*Lancaster* and the *Otranto* from San Nicolás, and the *Orbita* from the Mejillones in Peru.[4]

Given their respective positions and speeds, it was soon clear that the naval vessels would be able to reach the Horn before the *Seeadler*. The noose was tightening around the raider and one had to fear the worst for her gentleman captain and crew. There was little doubt that, if confronted, the *Seeadler* would face the might of the British navy, all guns blazing. Could she slip the net?

# 9
# A JOURNEY INTO DARKNESS

Von Luckner and his crew knew that they could expect no mercy from the British navy, and they also knew that the weather was likely to be similarly unrelenting. Every day, as they raced down the south Atlantic, the weather got chillier and the cold breeze pricked their skin, filling them with foreboding. They were approaching the Horn at a dreadful time of year. All aboard were experienced mariners who knew what this meant for a tall ship. Even if they avoided the Royal Navy, they could be weeks down there in that dark, icy hell trying to get through to the Pacific. There was a strong feeling that the party was over.

Off the Falklands, there came another reminder that their month-long daydream near the Equator had been almost divorced from the reality of war. Von Luckner awoke the crew from their slumber by stopping to lower an iron cross in the grey, cold waters of the south Atlantic. He was marking the spot where, two years earlier, Admiral von Spee had perished. Von Spee had been in charge of the German Imperial Navy's Pacific squadron when war had broken out, and had found himself somewhat isolated and unsure of what to do next. After defeating a somewhat ragtag British force off the coast of Chile in what became known as the 'Battle of Coronel', he was making his way back

home when he paused at the Falklands to shell the wireless station there. Unfortunately for him, the Royal Navy was alive to his movements and had been lying in wait there. It was soon clear to von Spee that his fleet was not only outnumbered, but also outgunned. The British ships were faster, with guns of greater range. They could pick off their adversaries while remaining out of range of their enemies' guns, and the result was a bloodbath.

Von Spee, aboard his flagship of the fleet, the *Scharnhorst*, refused to surrender and went down fighting, while the German battle cruiser the *Gneisnau* was eventually scuttled. When the smoke had cleared, 1,871 German sailors were dead, while the victorious British had lost only 29 lives.

These were the whom dead von Luckner wanted to honour, and despite their burning hurry, the *Seeadler* was hove-to, a sermon was read and wreaths, plus the iron cross, were tenderly lowered into the sea. It was a sobering moment, and drove home to all what might lie in wait for them off the Horn. There was little doubt that von Luckner would fight to the death rather than surrender to the enemy, and all braced themselves for real action.

A brisk northerly wind continued to push the ship south, as if hurrying her to her fate. On 6 April, there was a blow of another kind when the crew received the news that America had joined the Allies. The chill that settled over them mingled with a cold fear of the future. The glimmer of hope that had come with the withdrawal of the Russians from the war had been snuffed out. From a practical, and more positive, point of view, it did mean that the *Seeadler* had more targets to sink, and – should they make it around the Horn – the Pacific was suddenly a far richer hunting ground.

In the meantime, von Luckner kept his men focused on new tasks. His cover was blown, so it was best to make the ship as inconspicuous as possible. Early in the voyage a huge Norwegian flag had been painted on each side of her hull, which had also been emblazoned with '*Norge*' to denote her nationality. This was common practice among neutral shipping keen to make it clear to Allied and German shipping that they were not targets. It had been a useful part of the *Seeadler*'s disguise, but it was now not only unnecessary, but also highly conspicuous. It had to go. Rightly so, for back in the UK, detailed illustrations of the *Seeadler*, garnered from the testimony of her erstwhile captives, were being distributed throughout the shipping world. The element of surprise was gone, and from now on, raiding would no longer be so straightforward.

By 14 April, the *Seeadler* was roughly on the latitude of the easterly tip of Staten Island, the entrance to the traverse of Cape Horn. Yet they dared not get too close to it and were still many miles to the east. Traditionally, a tall ship would cut in relatively close to Cape Horn. Von Luckner knew that if he was to have any chance of slipping past the Royal Navy, he was going to have to give all land a wide berth; he would have to start well to the east, duck down a long way to the south, and then press on much further west, before heading back north. It would add many miles to his journey compared with the traditional route, but it was the best chance he had, and he realised that the auxiliary motor would be of great assistance in the circumstances. The big problem windjammers encountered when they weathered Cape Horn was that they could battle for days on end to gain some 'westing' (progress to the west), only to be driven back by a particularly savage blow, losing all the ground they had just gained. The *Seeadler*'s engine – although by no means her primary means of propulsion – meant that, unless the weather was particularly

hideous, the ship could at least remain roughly stationary and might even make a few miles west now and again. Still, their position was far from enviable as they continued to plunge southwards towards Antarctica. Way down south they might be safe from the Royal Navy, but icebergs were a real danger, particularly at night.

Noon on 15 April found the *Seeadler* beating against a strong, unfavourable wind. It was freezing on deck, with great icy showers of spray cascading over the boat with every scend. There were two men at the wheel now, grappling to keep the big ship under control as she was buffeted by gusts of wind. The *Seeadler* was full of purpose and beautiful, but it was hard to appreciate that when the cold in your sodden sea boots was so bitter it made you want to weep.

On the poop, von Luckner and Kircheiss stood in conversation, muffled by furs and great coats, with great spouts of steam smoking from their lips every time they spoke. Icy dewdrops formed on their noses, and their teeth chattered as they hunched against a wind that needled them with pitiless icy blasts. Both were jumpy, and they had every reason to be so. They felt the Royal Navy's presence, even if they didn't see it.

As a matter of fact, HMS *Orbita* and HMS *Otranto* were already in position and patrolling an invisible line running south from the tip of Cape Horn. HMS *Lancaster* was also steaming at full speed from San Nicolás in Peru. As darkness fell on that foreshortened southern winter day, the weather worsened and the *Seeadler* pounded on, being driven southward by a savage gale that ripped at the great seas of the Roaring Forties and hurled them smoking into the *Seeadler*.

The ship was being driven hard, yet she was well found, well manned and well cared for. She was able to take the storm in her stride, pressing her bow into the great snowy billows with grace. Pounding into the seas

and then rising high like a bird on the wing, she trembled with joy at being free and in her element. On deck, the deep sound of wind roaring in strong rigging filled the ears of the sailors: a symphony of the sea that no true sailor can resist.

All felt confident in the *Seeadler*'s ability to weather even the toughest Cape Horn storms. The last iron windjammers had been built to withstand these harsh conditions. What all feared, as darkness closed in, was ice. Down here, great bergs the size of substantial islands drifted with lethal potential. A collision with one of these monsters would likely be the end of the ship. Even if the crew managed to launch the boats, they were unlikely to survive long down in this freezing hell in an open boat. Every mile they headed south increased the danger, and the lookout peered helplessly into pitch black, straining his eyes to spot any flash of white in the screaming dark emptiness.

The following morning an iceberg was spotted, as von Luckner recalled: 'In the grey of dawn, we saw the mighty mountain far in front of us on starboard. It was many metres high, and yet, with only a ninth of its size towering above water. Its peculiar outlines changed with every view; in the jagged places it shone green to deep blue. It was the only iceberg we met.'[1]

Still they plunged on, the storm continuing its assault. Several days of near continuous storm-force winds had whipped the Southern Ocean into a seething mass of water. A sodden, sleet-infused wind picked up great bucketloads of spume and hurled them smoking icily along the surface of great grey mountains whose peaks were often lost in low grey cloud. Fortunately the crew were kept fully employed trimming the yards and repairing the sails, which split regularly as von Luckner pressed his ship as hard as he dared. Sometimes a sail would simply explode, leaving

a few icy tatters crackling in the breeze. The hard driving was paying off, however, and by 18 April the weather had moderated slightly. The *Seeadler* now found herself level with the tip of the Horn, although still many miles to the south.

It seemed there was a chance they would get through, but then came a cry from aloft that sent von Luckner's heart into his boots. 'Cruiser ahoy!' Here was the moment of crisis they had all been dreading. If they had been spotted, they were doomed, and their only hope was that they were carrying low sail because of the ferocity of the gale. The cruiser was still just barely visible to the north, so the *Seeadler* turned sharply south and fled for dear life. The only vessel this could possibly have been was HMS *Otranto*, a big 7,300-ton armed merchant cruiser that had already seen action and that had escaped from Graf von Spee's fleet at the Battle of Coronel, before being present to witness its destruction off the Falklands. She was heavily armed and had a top speed of 18 knots. If she had spotted the *Seeadler*, she would likely have blown her out of the water before the windjammer's guns were even within range.

All aboard collectively held their breath, waiting for the funnels of the *Otranto* to appear over the horizon at any moment, a harbinger of doom. Yet the attack never came. Perhaps the lookout on the *Otranto* was dozing, or perhaps the lookout aboard the *Seeadler*, perched high up in the rigging, merely imagined the *Otranto*'s presence. Whatever the answer, once again, von Luckner and his buccaneering crew seemed to have slipped the net. They saw no more of the Royal Navy and sailed on to freedom and the open Pacific.

By 21 April, a full week after she had begun her traverse of the dreaded Cape, the *Seeadler* began to head north into warmer waters. She was free to continue her raiding in a new ocean. The British did not have a

particularly large naval presence in the Pacific, so in some ways – despite her cover being blown – she was safer here than in the Atlantic.

The *Otranto*, incidentally, sailed on to her doom. The following year, she was part of a convoy escort making its way across the Atlantic. Off the coast of Scotland, the convoy ran into a horrendous storm and a navigational mix-up led to the *Otranto* colliding with HMS *Kashmir*. The collision disabled her engines and she drifted onto a reef off the coast of Islay with the loss of 470 lives.[2]

# 10
# IN THE LAND OF THE LOTUS EATERS

Gladys Taylor was a pretty, vivacious 23-year-old who longed for adventure. She lived in Mossyrock, Washington, with her parents. Mossyrock lay at the heart of Lewis County, an isolated, sleepy place dominated by great whispering pines and huge swathes of agricultural land. It was a place of timber and toil and men as tough as their axe hafts. Not much happened in Mossyrock, and the biggest excitement in the area was probably when the largest Douglas fir ever recorded was discovered at nearby Mineral in 1911.

This was a peaceful spot and, by and large, that was how the folks of Mossyrock liked it to remain. Certainly, the menace of the Great War had not intruded one iota into the lives of the inhabitants. At 23, Gladys should have been looking forward to marrying some local fellow and settling down. Doubtless, her parents thought it long overdue. Yet Gladys had other ideas. She was restless; she knew there was a world out there away from giant pines, farms and local tittle-tattle. She dreamt of distant shores and untold adventure. She envied men, who had the freedom to explore the world, and railed against the restrictions put upon her simply

by her sex. She spoke to her parents about this and they were baffled and did their best to discourage her. But there was a fire within Gladys that could not be put out by a few gentle words of discouragement, and in spring 1917, she determined to run away to sea.

Gladys slipped out of the family home early one May morning. She left no note, nor any indication of where she was headed. She had a plan, however, and made her way to Willapa harbour in Washington, some 80 miles away. Willapa was a small port, but it was thriving and its wharf was always bustling with timber schooners loading high deck cargoes bound for all corners of the globe. Here Gladys spotted the schooner *A B Johnson* preparing to depart, bound for Newcastle, New South Wales.

This was a stroke of luck, as Gladys had met Captain Peterson before, and knew him to be a good man whom she could trust to look after her. Somehow she managed to sneak aboard undetected and hid herself in the store room, where she planned to remain until the ship was far enough offshore that turning back and returning her would be deemed impossible. From her hiding place, she could only guess at what was going on. She knew the *A B Johnson* was due to leave, and heard great thuds on deck and groans from the wooden ribs of the schooner as the last of her cargo of lumber was loaded aboard. Then she felt a change in motion and a great flurry of activity as the *Johnson* cast off and headed down the calm waters of the Willapa River. She had to steady herself as the schooner made her way out into the wider reaches of the estuary and started to rise and fall gently to the rhythm of the open ocean.

Gladys heard a great commotion on deck, men yelling, footsteps pounding, chanting and singing as sails flogged, thundered and were sheeted home. Then she felt the schooner slant to the breeze and her whole hull thrum and sing to the magical, joyous sound of a big sailing

ship underway. She also felt the first thrill of freedom – the beginning of a magnificent adventure that she hoped would take her to the exotic shores that she had dreamt of for so long.

Several days later she felt the coast must be clear and presented herself to Captain Peterson, who recognised her. Peterson was a married man who knew what it was to have a daughter and he instantly felt protective towards this late addition to his crew. Some sailors believed at the time that having a woman aboard was tremendous bad luck, but Gladys was so good humoured and full of life, it was hard to begrudge her presence. Within a day or so, she was just another part of the boat and all returned to the routine of the voyage, embracing the hypnotic beauty and lethargy of a South Sea passage.

On 14 June, however, one month into their passage, something happened that changed all that. A tall ship was sighted, evidently making its way towards them, and although this was initially a happy sight – company at sea and the chance for a chat is always welcome – that all changed when a shell came whistling across their bows and the German flag was run up. A raider!

It seemed unbelievable, but Peterson had heard tell of queer goings-on in the Atlantic. He felt a surge of grief as he knew his ship was doomed, and, along with it, fear – not only for his own fate and that of the crew, but also for poor Gladys. The newspapers were crammed with lurid tales of Teutonic cruelty. Why, it was common knowledge that the Germans killed babies for fun. He stared at the rust-streaked sides of the Hun raider with her somewhat ragged, desperate-looking crew and feared the worst. He decided that Gladys must pose as his wife for the duration of their captivity in the vain hope that this might protect her from the depraved Germans.

All aboard watched with their hearts in their mouths, awaiting their fate with grim resignation as the prize crew approached the *A B Johnson*. Back home in Mossyrock, two parents who had probably already given up their daughter for dead looked set to have their worst fears confirmed.

You will by now be unsurprised to discover that Miss Smith found von Luckner 'very kind and a perfect gentleman'.[1] Certainly, if she had been in search of adventure, she had found it. The capture of the *A B Johnson* was the *Seeadler*'s first in her new Pacific hunting ground. Since her escape off Cape Horn, the *Seeadler* had run southward up the coast of Peru and Chile with the laughing blue Pacific to port and the great white snowy peaks of the distant Andes to starboard.

To be once more running free before balmy breezes, smashing through feathery whitecaps, felt like a miraculous reprieve after the dark horror of Cape Horn. All aboard initially felt exhilarated and thoughts turned once more to raiding. Yet the Pacific was a very different kettle of fish from the Atlantic. Around the Equator in the Atlantic, they had been on one of the great veins of commerce, with ships from all corners of the world converging on their way to and from Europe. It had been like a conveyor belt that produced a tempting-looking prize with incredible regularity. But in the Pacific commerce was far more scattered and sporadic. America's entry into the war limited still further the number of neutral ports, although it did offer the possibility of more prizes. In addition, it seems the British had communicated poorly with the Americans concerning the *Seeadler*, and that once she had escaped into the Pacific, the British no longer took an interest in her.

While now on a different ocean, von Luckner again determined to cruise in the vicinity of the Equator. This time he was aiming to capture

shipping running between San Francisco and Australia. Raiding was never going to be as spectacular as it had been in the Atlantic, but there was still a steady trickle of traders travelling along this path between two countries at war with Germany. In addition, the British had a far weaker naval presence in the Pacific than almost anywhere else, and the South Sea Islands offered plenty of obscure places to hide and – if need be – covertly land for provisions or repairs.

Here was a crucial point. By the time the *Seeadler* arrived off her new cruising ground in the vicinity of Christmas Island in mid June, she had been sailing continuously for over six months. Despite supplies being regularly topped up from captured ships, the endless passage was beginning to take its toll on the men. After such a long stretch at sea, it was natural that they should start to feel homesick. There was, after all, no real prospect of returning to Germany until the war was over, something that didn't seem particularly likely in June 1917. What's more, supplies of fresh fruit and vegetables had run low on the journey up the Pacific, which had taken longer than expected, and there were signs that the health of some of the men was suffering. This gave the *Seeadler* a certain air of lassitude that had not been present in the Atlantic. It didn't help that there were fewer prizes to chase in this region, and the climate itself played a part.

The South Seas was a bewitching place that could seduce a man and reduce him to a listless bum within the space of a few months. The heat and the shimmering beauty of this part of the world corroded discipline in a way that few other places could. All too often Europeans who settled out here turned to the bottle to deal with the hard reality of being bored in paradise – wanting for nothing, except real purpose.

The crew of the *Seeadler*, however, were naval men of steel, and although they were unquestionably starting to rust and flake, they stuck to their task. Between 8 June and 8 July, three more ships were captured and sunk. The first was the *A B Johnson*. Her capture was followed by the *R C Slade*, commanded by Captain Haldor Smith, on 18 June; and the *Manilla*, with Captain Southard in charge, on 8 July.

Captain Smith of the *R C Slade* was actually a good friend of Peterson of the *A B Johnson* and was most surprised to discover that his old friend seemed to have found himself a new and unsuitably young wife. In actual fact, once Peterson realised that von Luckner and his crew were certainly not rapists and baby-killers, he had explained the situation to von Luckner, but both agreed it would make life easier for everyone if Gladys were to remain his 'wife' for the remainder of the cruise. Peterson, however, was keen that von Luckner should stress, in any subsequent reports, that Gladys Taylor was not his actual wife, for fear that his actual wife might get the wrong end of the stick.

Captain Haldor Smith of the *R C Slade* spoke in detail about his adventures aboard the *Seeadler* shortly after his release and painted a gritty 'warts and all' picture. It is worth bearing in mind that the war was still on when he spoke about his time aboard, which may have been why he was sometimes scathing, but he did also capture a certain listlessness and unease among a crew who had been too long aboard and too many months away from home. His description of his capture is also well worth recounting, as it gives a good flavour of exactly how it felt to be taken by the raider. We'll therefore start from the beginning:

*I was in the cabin at supper and the second mate, Johansen, was on watch. He came to the door. He wasn't hurried, it was just*

*part of his duty to report a sail sighted – and said: 'Captain Smith, a sail astern.'*

*I went above and aloft, taking my glass up the mizzen rigging, halfway to the crosstree. From the deck not much was to be made out but from the rigging with the glass, it was easy to see a full rigged ship, a three master, coming up very fast – faster than the wind, for we were making only two knots, the wind being very light.*

*But more than that, I knew that there were no full-rigged ships like this in the Pacific. All those one knew of could be accounted for in Sydney or in the other ports. Had we been a thousand miles further east, she might have been a ship bound for Portland with grain, from around the Horn. If it had been a different time of year, she might have been one of the Alaska Packers [a fleet of windjammers that operated out of San Francisco]. But time and place weren't right for that and I knew something was up.*

*And all the time she was coming up on us entirely too fast for any proper ship. The crew were staring at her as she rose bit by bit over the horizon; somehow they seemed to think it was a joke. Why can't be told, maybe my manner led them to think they had a joke on me; maybe they thought it was a lark of some kind; maybe they were just glad to see a sail.*

*When the three master was about eight miles off, when the hull was beginning to raise and we could see it without going aloft, there was a heavy flash. There had been occasional squalls alternating with bright pieces of sunshine, for we were at the beginning of the doldrums, between the southeast and northeast trades. Now the weather continued broken but dusk was closing in: It was about 5.30 in the evening. The flare of the gun stood out clear and red in the shadows.*

*Two miles astern there was a splash and a fountain. It was plain they were firing at their extreme range; beyond that and the rig, nothing much else was to be made out, for the strange ship hadn't come near enough for us to see the hull from the deck.*

*There was never a light wind that got cursed for its lightness as that one did. Two knots was the best that we could do and this three master was coming down like a spook ship with more speed than anything in the nature of sails could account for.*

*But whatever it is to be, will be, said I, and I went below again to finish my dinner. It's a good thing to lay in supplies while you have a chance. The officer of the watch came down again. 'What does he want?' he asked. 'Well,' said I, with a mouthful, 'I can tell you this much, he's not saluting.'*

*When I got on deck again it was clear she was overtaking the Slade. The shells weren't falling far behind now, slamming up with a lazy splash; they were skimming and bouncing on the water, knocking spray aside as they passed by us and fell ahead.*

*The man at the wheel was a Russian Finn. At every shot he ducked and dropped the wheel like a soldier under rifle fire for the first time and the rest of them didn't have any time or thought to laugh either. It was no joke now. Nine shells they fired, and uncomfortably close they got. Why we weren't hit, lord knows – and what a shell would have done to our cargo of copra [palm oil]; it would have been like a match to celluloid.*

*Nearer and nearer they edged, and the ship drawing up all the while and the Stars and Stripes hanging limp over us in the breeze, so at last there wasn't any hope of getting away in the darkness and there was nothing for it but to heave-to or be blown to bits. It was*

*dark when the ship came abreast, five or six ship lengths away on the starboard side of us. There was a moment of stillness and we heard voices from her above the rustle of the waves. They were voices giving orders to clew up the sails and bring the ship to six boat lengths away. And they were German voices. Then I knew our goose was cooked. Who that strange ship was that sailed faster than the wind, I still had no definite idea as she lay there scarcely more than a biscuit toss from us in the dark, but certain it was that she had overhauled us for no good of ours.*

*She put off a motor boat and in a few minutes the* R C Slade *from Sydney to San Francisco with copra was formally a prize of the German commerce raider* Seeadler, *with a prize crew of ten aboard under Prize officer Pries and the German ship's doctor, who fell to immediately on my Scotch whisky.*

*Meanwhile the prize officer was rapidly overhauling my papers. When he had ascertained who we were and what we had, he informed us we were captured and that the* Slade *would be destroyed.*

*So much for the formalities, they didn't take long. Then the Germans turned to the matter of utmost importance to them, after the professional business in hand, and their first question was: 'Have you any potatoes?' We had half a ton of them and very good they were too, but the question raised doubts among us as to what we had to face on the* Seeadler.

*Even before we were rounded up to be taken aboard the raider on the motorboat, the Germans, officer, doctor and men, were hunting for newspapers and magazines – for everything that would give them word of the war's progress. This hunger of theirs was more interesting than the stomach hunger. After they had taken a glance at the latest*

*doings in Europe and in the naval and submarine warfare, what do you think they grabbed next – and that with the zest of a youngster after a new toy? The funny papers. They were pirates by all the rights of the sea, aboard a captured schooner they had done their best to sink when it seemed darkness would let her escape, and their first thoughts after finding out if they were still at war was of kartoffels and comic supplements.*

*Boarding the* Seeadler *that first night with the* Slade *just a few specks of light as we drew apart for the time being was like arriving in a big, strange city. Bustle, noise, a foreign language, doubt, uncertainty, some fear – it would be forgotten soon. There were fellow Americans aboard and in the face of all their piracy, there was courtesy among the German officers and some kindness among the men.*[2]

Despite the surprisingly friendly welcome, it was soon clear to Smith that the men had been cooped up aboard the *Seeadler* far too long. In his reminiscences, he repeatedly alludes to the ship being filthy, although this is not backed up by other eyewitness accounts. He also makes it clear that all was not well aboard the *Seeadler*, and here there is probably a kernel of truth. Three captured ships in a month was a pretty poor return, and meant an awful lot of time was spent drifting around aimlessly under shortened sail.

Men need a purpose in life, and a malaise began to settle over the ship. It was also clear that the men needed dry land and fresh water, as von Luckner recalls:

*The dreadful heat, the lack of movement and employment, the bad water and the taint of fresh water put the mood down.*

*No hospitable harbour was available to us, for we Germans have no friends, no justice to be expected. We would be tolerated for the most 24 hours, and then surrounded by the enemy. No one will open their doors, we must help ourselves. Two hundred and fifty days and our water tanks had still not been replenished! If only a refreshing bath could have been allowed!*

*We had crossed 35,000 miles of ocean. Although we were still ready to continue on toward the Cape of Good Hope, we now felt the greatest enemy of the seaman: Beriberi, the disease in which the blood becomes water. We knew that we had to go to an island to find something fresh.*[3]

There was also no question that the crew of the *Seeadler* were struggling to remain focused on the job in hand. They were now many miles from the iron hand of the Imperial Navy, and although a sense of duty and discipline had been drummed into each and every sailor aboard, there was still a slackening in the previously taut, purposeful naval unit. Perhaps it was the heat or the feeling of being utterly divorced from reality in their own strange bubble. Sometimes it was all one could do just to loll on deck.

The men took to shark fishing to pass the days. On one occasion, this extreme form of fishing nearly had fatal consequences for the *Seeadler*, for the men (and von Luckner) had taken to baiting their hooks with a piece of meat with a grenade embedded in it. This usually led to the spectacular explosion of the shark as it took the bait, but on one occasion the shark simply swallowed the bait whole, while at the same time eluding the hook. All aboard looked on with horror as the shark swam off unharmed and spent the next few days expecting this mobile incendiary to rub up

against the hull of the *Seeadler* and explode, possibly wrecking the raider in the process.

Time hung heavy on all aboard, and on none more so than von Luckner himself, who was a man of action. Haldor Smith had plenty of time to get to know his captor and, inevitably, he warmed to the man who was supposed to be his enemy:

> *It was hot, we were in the doldrums; it rained at any time it felt like it and we had nothing to do except to walk up and down and talk – and wish – but the commander of the raider more than once proved a relaxation, not only to talk to (for he was an affable fellow when he wanted to be) but also to watch.*
>
> *A martinet if ever there was one – a product of the military caste system. Yet he had the corners rubbed, if not off, at least sufficiently to give him a touch of courtesy to those in his power. I don't want to give the impression that this Graf, who had sent fourteen or fifteen merchantmen to the bottom, was a mean man. But he had to be rubbed the right way and every German – from the pettiest petty officer up – did all the kow-towing he could. It often seemed to me that this dirty old tub, loitering where it had no business to be, was a little bit of a German principality with von Luckner for prince.*
>
> *Still, while he could be a pirate in deed and manner while he was vain and a braggart and a gorgeous liar and one who treated his men like the scum of the earth, we must give him his due. He could have put on a good deal more swagger. He might have worn a monocle, but he didn't. He might have been less kindly in such sentimental affairs such as providing a paper flower bouquet for the captain of a ship he had captured. He was, in a large extent, a good man.*

Perhaps it was this underlying fact – that von Luckner was a good man – that held the crew together. For there is no doubt that discipline was being stretched as boredom, depression and homesickness gripped the crew. Smith gives a good insight into life aboard:

> *A raggeder crew than the* Seeadler's *it would be hard to imagine. As they went about their tasks on the raider day by day they looked like scarecrows or men in a funny theatre play. Hardly one of them had a single piece of uniform for such times – one a jacket, one a cap, another a pair of pants and the rest any clothes they had been able to get from the long list of vessels they had sent down. But for Saturday, when there was a parade every week, they had a dress outfit and then alone did they look like naval men, lined up on that dirty deck of the rusty old tub that flew the German battle flag.*
>
> *We began a long period of idling about, drifting a good part of the time, taking no advantage of the winds that might blow to a port and using the diesel engines only when there was prey in sight or turning them over once a week – for ten minutes or so at parade on Saturdays – to keep them limbered up.*
>
> *Time and again in that six weeks I was aboard the raider we crossed the sea lanes where the* Slade *and* Johnson *had been taken. We were in that immediate vicinity for three weeks on end, lying in wait, and after the novelty of being held prisoner on a pirate ship had worn off, it was a heart breaking job – just the tedium of it, not to mention the little circumstance that if anything but a merchantman sighted us we'd stand every chance of being scattered over a large area of water in little pieces.*

*The prisoners were put to work and perhaps their keeping the prisoners at work was a matter of policy: busy men have less time for trouble making than idle. And perhaps that is why they drove their own men so hard. But certain it is that the German sailors were disgruntled and in the face of sharp methods of their officers they gave signs enough of their dissatisfaction.*

*In all the six weeks that I was aboard the* Seeadler *there never was a time when the brig [prison] was empty and a hell hole that brig was too! There were often significant incidents in the Saturday parades which nearly always caused someone to be sent to the brig – and they feared it too. They were hauling braces one day when a sailor said: 'I hope she blows to hell with all of us on board.' The count [von Luckner] lying nearby in a hammock overheard. At the Saturday parade he had the man brought before him. There was no semblance of officer-like dignity – the captain swore, raved, waved his arms and sentenced him to fourteen days in the brig and three weeks of the silent punishment; he might speak to no one for those three weeks after he left the brig and no one might address him under penalty of fourteen days imprisonment. That was not the only time the count read the riot act to them nor the only time muttering brought him to a fine anger.*[4]

How much Smith is exaggerating is difficult to say, but in the circumstances it's easy to understand why discipline might have been beginning to fray. The *Seeadler* must have felt like a combination of a prison and a coffin to some of the men. They had been living with the threat of capture for months on end and their nerves were sanded down to nothing.

Whatever the perceived troubles were aboard the raider, von Luckner was disgusted by the slim pickings in the Pacific and realised the lack of direction and action could prove fatal. Plans were mooted to start heading back to Germany by way of the Cape of Good Hope – raiding along the way, of course. Yet before such a voyage could be contemplated, all the men needed time ashore. The ship needed attention too, for her underside was now fearfully clogged up with weed that seriously compromised her speed. They had witnessed that on the seemingly interminable voyage up through the Pacific to their current cruising ground.

The choice of where to stop was not so difficult, for the South Seas are full of islands and atolls, many unoccupied, where a ship could disappear for years at a time. There might be a few natives ashore, but the chance of falling afoul of the British or French authorities was all but non-existent, and even if they did, the *Seeadler* was likely to be better armed. All von Luckner had to do was pick out a suitable island.

The *Seeadler*'s bow was swung to the west and she headed towards the labyrinth of islands. Von Luckner picked out the low coral atoll of Mopelia, or Maupihaa, part of the Society Islands.[5] On a chart it is just a fingernail of land in a vast ocean, and von Luckner doubtless chose this island for its isolation and because, judging by its shape, it seemed to promise plenty of shelter. The pilot guide also indicated that it had a fresh-water supply.

All the Germans were rather out of their depth by now. They were strangers in a truly strange and magical part of the world populated by exotic natives who, in 1917, were known still to enjoy the taste of human flesh. This was a world of glowing white beaches, so bright they made you shade your eyes, limpid lagoons that enticed you to swim, and feathery palms. Yet paradise has its snakes, and islands are

treacherous to the sailor. There are currents that can set you many miles off your course before you even notice, leaving you lost for days amid labyrinths of reef, as well as low-lying atolls. Even von Luckner, for all his years of seafaring, had spent precious little time in the South Seas, and this was a place where expertise was really valuable. As he observed, 'As beautiful as the Seas are, they are the least favourable for the sailor. There is nothing more charming and nothing more treacherous in the world.'[6]

The South Seas were not the natural cruising ground of a big 245-foot sailing ship. Schooners were the trading vessel of choice within these patterns of islands for good reason: harbours were often intricate and reef strewn, while strong currents added another dangerous challenge, particularly for a big ship, which was handicapped by its deeper draft and general unwieldiness in an area where manoeuvrability was often vital. Novice sailors were frequently known to get hopelessly lost, and although the Germans were excellent navigators and accomplished sailors, they were not in their element here. At times, von Luckner was not afraid to consult the American skippers whom he had captured to tap into their expertise and detailed knowledge of the area.

On the morning of 29 July, Mopelia hove into view, obscured right until the last as it was so low lying – initially just a tuft of palms apparently poking out of the open sea. Yet as they neared, they came to see just how beautiful the island was, as von Luckner recalled: 'It was as if we had a fairyland before us. The island greeted us with its tall palm trees and gum trees like a true paradise. The coral reefs descended below the water level to a depth of many metres, giving new colours and images in the reflection of the sun-shimmering water at each stage as a result of the white corals.

'There are a lot of transitions from white to green, and deep bluish tints of the most wonderful variety. There was a circular reef, on the ridge of which were four small islets and a strip-shaped main island surrounded by the circular lagoon.' [7]

The *Seeadler* was anchored outside the atoll, exposed to the elements. It was not an ideal arrangement, but anyone who goes to Mopelia would rapidly see why. The island is simply a low-lying narrow crescent encircled by a coral reef that curls around it like a snake. Inside is a breathtakingly beautiful lagoon. A sheet of azure iridescent water is draped over a bed of the whitest sand. Outside, the Pacific swells pound the reef, but inside the lagoon all is tranquil. There is one entrance into the atoll and it is little more than ten metres wide, with a current that can race through at up to three knots. To either side of this narrow channel are razor-sharp coral reefs. To guide the *Seeadler* through this narrow entrance would have taken nerves of steel and, given von Luckner's unquestionable dare, it's likely that it simply was not possible at all.

A look at Mopelia today suggests that the *Seeadler* could have squeezed through, but the depth in the channel is almost exactly that of the ship itself. Stranding in this narrow bottleneck would have been fatal, as she would have sheered immediately into the razor-sharp reefs on either side and been rapidly destroyed. This was probably what decided von Luckner on anchoring some distance off.

The plan was that the ship's boats would shuttle crew to and from the shore, while the work of re-provisioning started. Initially, Kircheiss was sent ashore with a small band of armed men to scout out the island. A couple of small huts could be seen from the deck of the *Seeadler*, so it was important to find out if anyone was there and whether they were friend

or foe. All hung off the rail and watched with deep envy as Kircheiss and his crew headed for shore. Threading the narrow entrance, they abruptly found themselves in flat water; after six months of rolling almost continuously, suddenly they were still. Before them lay the palm-fringed shore, a slash of blinding white between bright blue and rich green that beckoned them on.

For the men of the *Seeadler*, this return to dry land after six months afloat must have been heavenly. They had, after all, landed in paradise, and to wade through the soft sands and warm waters of the lagoon and step ashore on such a beautiful beach must have felt incredible. Above, the breeze whispered in the palm trees. It was a magical spot that just begged to be explored, although there wasn't really a great deal to discover. The men soon found that the huts were occupied by four local Kanakas – Pacific Island workers – stationed there to collect copra for a company in Tahiti. (Copra is the dried kernel of the coconut, which can be processed to produce coconut oil, among other things.)

Life on the island must have been extremely slow, and the Kanakas were pleased to encounter such an intriguing diversion. They helped Kircheiss and his men to gather coconuts, and to catch a wild pig and her piglets, before the scouting group returned to the *Seeadler*.

All aboard the ship were itching to get ashore, but there were problems, as the holding off the reef was poor and the anchor refused to grip the bottom. This meant the big ship was repeatedly dragged well offshore in the stiff breeze. The first night they had awoken to find her some ten miles offshore, and had brought her back and re-anchored laboriously, this time dropping both anchors. Even then she dragged and required constant watching.

Von Luckner was frustrated, as he and the crew just wanted to get ashore and enjoy this incredible paradise. Yet it was imperative to ensure the ship was safe. He and his officers had very limited experience of anchoring off atolls and were slightly nonplussed as to what to do about this problem. The wind was blowing steadily offshore and the current coming out of the atoll was doing the same. One tempting solution, therefore, was to anchor reasonably close to the atoll, attach a sternline to one of the coral heads on the reef, and then tighten that up. It seemed like a good solution, but Kling was unsure, arguing that if the wind switched suddenly, the ship might end up being dashed onto the reef.

Von Luckner was uncertain of what to do, and consulted with the skippers of the schooners he had captured to see if this was standard practice in the South Sea islands. Peterson, captain of the *A B Johnson*, told von Luckner that he himself frequently carried out this method of securing the ship.

In fact, this was not true. If von Luckner and his officers had possessed greater knowledge of the area, they would have known that this method of tethering a ship to the reef was highly unorthodox and extremely risky. True, there was a strong current running out of the atoll, but it was producing an unpredictable and vicious back eddy, and it took only the wind to drop for the ship to be pretty much doomed.

Captain Peterson later recalled being 'surprised' to be asked such a question, which 'could only have been asked by a man poorly informed in navigation matters'. It was a poor decision and, for once, von Luckner's trusting nature may have got the better of him. 'From then on,' Peterson states, 'we were certain the ship would be wrecked as soon as the wind changed.'[8]

Hans Hansen, who served as first mate aboard the *Manila*, spelt the matter out even more clearly in recalling the *Seeadler*'s arrival at Mopelia: 'The intention was to go into the lagoon, but the entrance proved too shallow, so an attempt was made to anchor on the reef. The anchor broke through the reef and the vessel drifted all night, with the Trade [wind] freshening. In the morning mooring wires were run to the reef.

'The Germans wanted to know whether the vessel was safe. We replied that so long as the Trade remained as it was she was safe. But we failed to explain that in a calm the vessel would swing on the reef. We felt that the undertow and eddy from the inlet to the lagoon would explain that soon enough.'[9]

This was on 31 July, and with the trade winds blowing steadily and reliably, all were satisfied that the raider was secure for the time it would take to restock. The crew worked hard, loading fresh supplies and scrubbing the *Seeadler*'s hull in order to remove the weeds.

On 2 August, von Luckner decided it was time for a treat, and a picnic expedition was organised for a decent chunk of the crew and officers, plus the captains of the three captured schooners. The party left early that morning, leaving the remainder of the crew under the supervision of Lieutenant Pries. They continued with the scrubbing of the ship, watching with envy as the launch, laden with crew and picnic, headed for that gleaming, pristine beach.

The wind was lighter that morning, and the ship was weaving about uneasily in the current that poured forth from the entrance to the atoll; weird eddies made her switch back and forth nervously and the decision was taken to set the staysails to ensure she stayed off the reef. Shortly after the launch departed, the remainder of the

crew were seen aloft setting the foresail, as the breeze had evidently slackened further.

As the shore party sped away from the ship, they looked back at her with pride. She was a good-looking ship, there was no question of that. The Glasgow shipbuilders knew their work back in the 1880s and could still turn out a handsome hull. Not only that, but she had proved herself to be an admirable raider. For six months she had been their world. It was odd for von Luckner and his men to see their command from the sea, particularly with her sails drawing as if she was underway.

Suddenly there came two sharp reports and a crackle, as two star shells burst overhead. This was the prearranged emergency signal that the party needed to return. The boat was spun around, and, even as they closed with the *Seeadler*, they could see exactly what was happening, for the wind had shifted sufficiently to allow the stern to swing towards the reef.

The officers left aboard had not reacted quickly enough and her stern had fouled the reef. Even as they hurried back, they could see the *Seeadler* was being lifted up by the Pacific swell and hurled with a horrible crashing thud back down onto the sharp coral atoll. By the time they were back aboard, the engine was running and everything was being done to get the stricken ship off the reef. A few hours of pounding in the breakers and she would be doomed. Yet the engine was rendered useless as the propeller was fouled on the reef.

Things were looking exceedingly bleak, but the crew worked furiously throughout the day to try to get the *Seeadler* back into deep water. Without her, they would be stranded, Crusoes on this strange island, their mission over. The ship had fouled the reef at 9.25am and it was not

long before water was reported in the aft hold. All sorts of efforts were made to free her, even deliberately flooding the forehold in an attempt to raise her stern. Yet, in a few short hours, it was clear that the jig was up. At 3pm that day, von Luckner ordered the *Seeadler* to be abandoned. This was no mean feat, because the ship's boats could not get right into the shore on the smaller island; landing the salvaged supplies involved a 30-metre wade across razor-sharp coral while lumbered down with supplies. It would be several days before the *Seeadler* was fully abandoned, and a small group remained aboard the wrecked barque while this work was carried out. In a few short hours, the crew had lost their ship, and the crew prepared themselves for a new life as castaways in this remote corner of paradise.

This was the prosaic end to the last sailing raider that had cut such a dash through the Atlantic and eluded the Royal Navy in the tightest of corners. Buccaneering would never be quite the same again. It must have been a bitter pill for von Luckner and his men to swallow. Later, Peterson of the *A B Johnson* would imply that he and his fellow schooner captains had duped von Luckner into wrecking his own ship by encouraging him to anchor his ship in a manner that was patently unsafe.

Peterson maintained that they had been told that they would be interned aboard until the ship returned to Hamburg, whereupon they would be held as prisoners of war. If this were true, then it is easy to understand their eagerness to wreck the German raider, which had, after all, recently destroyed their own commands. Certainly, simply by maintaining their silence on the matter of how to anchor in such a spot, they were to some extent implicated in the wreck.

If the *Seeadler*'s end was mundane, it did not remain so for long in the eyes of her commander. He was no doubt shattered by her loss, but

his quick mind was already thinking ahead, and he decided to fabricate a story whereby the *Seeadler* was destroyed by a tidal wave – a far more romantic and dramatic end to her voyage. Here is how von Luckner describes her final minutes:

> *On the 2nd of August, towards 9.30am we were just about to send off a boat with those who were allowed on shore, we saw the surface of the sea on the horizon starting to swell in a peculiar way. What was that? Initially we assumed it was a Fata Morgana [mirage on the horizon]; after a time we noticed how the swelling was rolling closer and closer, getting higher and higher the nearer it came. It was a tidal wave which had been caused by a undersea earthquake. … the monstrosity rolled nearer. The ship was already rising in the swell that preceded it. We could count the seconds that remained to save the ship. Everyone was listening for the sound of the engine. Too late! The wave raged up, grabbed our ship from underneath, lifted it up and crashed it down on the coral reef. The masts, the crown of our ship, collapsed into pieces; big blocks of coral weighing a hundred pounds and as big as barrels had broken off as we hit the reef and were thrown on to the ship like grenades, and when the tidal wave had passed away, there was our proud 'Seeadler' smashed to pieces, reduced to a wreck on the coral reef.*[10]

It's a good story, but highly unlikely to be true, and it is not corroborated by the official ship's diary or by the statements of Captain Peterson, Captain Smith or Mate Hansen. The likelihood is that von Luckner and the crew fabricated this rather dramatic denouement in order to ensure they were not censured when (if) they returned to Germany. No one

could be held to account for what was an act of God, while, in the other version of events, the finger of blame pointed fairly clearly at von Luckner and his officers. The fact that this fabrication by von Luckner was never contradicted by any of the *Seeadler*'s crew, even many years after the event, also suggests that, despite Haldor Smith's claims otherwise, they remained loyal to von Luckner and his officers.

That evening, as a campfire glowed on the beach, all present must have stared out gloomily at the *Seeadler*. She remained afloat, but hopelessly wrecked, her yards dishevelled, silhouetted dark black against the twilight like a scarecrow. Impaled on the reef, she no longer rode confidently to her anchor, and had developed an awkward, ugly list. It was a horrid reminder of their own folly and the fact that their mission was over. Doubtless, they felt they had failed. Yet they had far exceeded expectations, and even by the time they had sunk their third Allied ship, they had already made a success of their mission. To sink 14 ships in total, with the loss of only one life, was a mighty achievement. In fact, only SMS *Moewe* and SMS *Wolf* managed better hit rates, and they had left many more casualties in their wake.

Darkness came suddenly in this part of the world, as if a light had been suddenly snuffed out. As the crew sat and took in the velvety night, the sky a great canopy of stars, they really should have counted their blessings. They were trapped on an island that had ample food and a fresh-water supply. The scenery wasn't too dreadful either. For all that von Luckner and his officers may have cursed their luck, they were surely among the most fortunate Germans on the planet at that moment. Back home, their families continued to suffer the effects of the blockades, and by August 1917, people were beginning to die from the effects of malnutrition brought on by the preceding winter. Meanwhile,

the spectre of another winter of fuel and food shortages loomed over the populace.

Over in France, the third battle of Ypres had begun with the Battle of Pilckem Ridge. The Allies claimed victory in this because they had advanced 2,700 metres, with the loss of 31,820 lives, a number which General Haig considered 'low'.[11] Nevertheless, it was one of the first signs that the war was turning decisively in the Allies' favour. Perhaps still more telling was an incident at Wilhelmshafen, where sailors from SMS *Prinzregent Luitpold* marched into the town demanding an end to the bloodshed. The mutiny was rapidly silenced and 75 men were arrested, with a number executed or imprisoned. One of those who awaited execution stated, 'Nobody wanted a revolution, we just wanted to be treated more like human beings.'

Half a world away, the 64 crew members of the *Seeadler* lay on a tropical beach and yearned for a homeland that was looking into the abyss. They were commanded by a man who, whatever his flaws, had treated both friend and foe with humanity. Doubtless he was now suspecting that this very humanity had allowed him to be duped by his prisoners into wrecking his command. However, he was already plotting his next move: how to escape and carry on with their raiding. Unsurprisingly, the plan he hatched was full of adventure.

# 11
# ON THE BEACH

The sudden loss of the *Seeadler* was essentially the destruction of a small world for the crew and it changed everything. Discipline, already crumbling, was going to be even more difficult to maintain. One of the few things that must have kept crew members going during those long months of raiding was the promise that they would return to Germany and their families. The *Seeadler* might have felt like a prison, yet she was also the crew's salvation, and her destruction must have been a cruel blow to many. Yet that Teutonic sense of duty was embedded deep within their psyche and, ragged and disillusioned as they were, for now they remained obedient to their superiors. In reality, they had little choice. There was more at stake than a war now; if they didn't stick together, they might not even survive. All worked with a will as they set about salvaging everything they could from the ship.

Mopelia's main island was situated on the eastern side of the atoll, with a much smaller, bare sandy island on the western side of the lagoon. It was decided that all the stores should initially be transshipped to this smaller island where, it was reasoned, they would be safe from prying hands and also the wildlife, which was already making itself a nuisance on the mainland.

Men and officers stripped the poor old *Seeadler* of everything that moved. Food, ammunition, diesel and water were all brought ashore and stored. The men were aided by the American prisoners. Haldor Smith of the *Slade* saw the significance of this move, as he later recalled: 'The object was to keep the stores safe without a guard and was but one of many signs that the German officers had none too great faith in their men who would have liked to finish off all the supplies and let starvation force a surrender by wireless.'[1]

The dynamic between the Germans and the Americans changed when they were ashore. Aboard *Seeadler*, it had made sense to keep the Americans prisoner, yet on land, things became confusing. Aboard the *Seeadler*, the Germans had been the providers, but in this new world, the Americans were evidently the more competent when it came to foraging and surviving. This was not particularly surprising, as the men from the schooners were South Sea Island traders and armed with a great deal of local knowledge. This helped the Germans, while it also created a slightly queasy interaction between the parties.

The first couple of nights were unquestionably quite tough as all sought to get their bearings and adjust to their new and novel surroundings. A single night spent slung in a hammock beneath the stars convinced most that this was not a practical solution. They were menaced by insects and, most of all, faced the ever-present threat of a coconut coming whistling down mid-snooze and braining them. After a number of these extremely alarming aerial assaults, some members of the party determined to head to the beach and sleep there; they soon hurried back, having been thoroughly disturbed by a steady procession of inquisitive hermit crabs.

Following these discomforts, work commenced rapidly on building some more permanent dwellings, which ended up being quite elaborate, as von Luckner recalls:

*At first, a large place was cleared of the undergrowth and scrub, then the palm trees were cut down and the timber dragged away. The first tent that we created was a failure, but every subsequent one got better. We usually built the Zelthütten in such a way that one sail fit for all. Our sails, which had served us faithfully in carrying us halfway across the world, were once more our servant.*

*Lessons were given to one of our prisoners, the captain Peterson, who, with his pretty young American life-companion [Gladys Taylor], produced himself a dazzlingly beautiful tent. The prisoners were on the right side. The beach path in front of the tents, the Seeadler promenade, led from Germantown, as our city was named by the prisoners, to Americantown and Frenchtown [where the original residents of the island lived].*

*In addition to this, there was an officer's mess which even had a wooden floor, which was laid out of the walls of a deckhouse. On the back wall there was a bookshelf featuring our beloved Meyer's Conversational Lexicon. The armchairs were screwed on the floor around the mess, so it looked like a real ship saloon. At the front was a porch, enclosed by palm trees, which the natives had braided.*

*So our living rooms were equipped with all good furniture from the ship. At my desk I seldom sat. The sub-officers built their own trade mess, the technical staff a special dwelling-house with berths. The men had all the lockers and benches in their rooms. All stones were*

*strewn with fine white coral sand. In the middle of the camp we had what we called the market square, where the band was played in the evening. Our generator gave us electric light. Dr Pietsch, the ship's physician, erected his hospital and smoked his never-ending cigar. We had a large smoking device, in which, with the help of coconut shells, we smoked about two hundred fish a day. A beautiful bathing beach lay on the lagoon. At night one could hear the surf beat as a gentle cradle. If we were in the afternoons, we refreshed ourselves on the windward side at the sea breeze.*[2]

Von Luckner appointed himself governor of this newfound corner of the German empire and life began to gain some semblance of comfort. To everyone's relief, it was discovered that there was an abundance of fresh water. The generator from the *Seeadler* had also been brought ashore, meaning that electricity could be generated and the wireless set used.

In the evenings, Germantown – or Seeadlersdorf, as the crew began to call it – was illuminated by a string of electric lights, and the officers could sit out on the veranda of their improvised saloon and sip on the remainder of their cognac and champagne while the band strummed away gently. It was all surprisingly civilised. After a couple of days of hunger, the castaways also managed to sort out some satisfactory eating arrangements.

They had an estimated three months' worth of supplies salvaged from the *Seeadler* and these were supplemented by nature's bountiful provender on the island. Initially, a diet of coconuts and hermit crabs was about all that was on the menu, but this was soon supplemented by shellfish, gulls' eggs, giant tortoise and fish, which were caught in nets or dynamited. The latter method killed them in a spectacular, but inefficient, way

and was later banned by von Luckner as it was deemed a waste of their dynamite supplies. A final Teutonic touch was added to the menu when it was discovered that the tenderest palm fronds could be boiled up into something vaguely resembling sauerkraut.

On 10 August, Lieutenant Krause and the last of the men who had remained on board the *Seeadler* were brought ashore, and Krause notes in his diary that life was far from unpleasant for officers ashore: 'Now I am finally on shore. The tent is delightful. In one part is Steersman Leudemann, in the other the Doctor, in the last myself. We have an orderly to make our bed. At any rate we have a sofa, cushions, seat and table. I also brought the wash stand. I had decorations put up. A picture and sabre above it. On the left a picture, a barometer; on the right a clock.'

His entry on 11 August, however, gives some indication of the drawbacks of island life: 'I have not slept too well for the first night. On the roof of the tent some rats danced a Cake Walk. After I had scared them away by tickling the soles of their feet with a brick I dozed off again. But not for long, a lizard slid with lightning like rapidity over my arm. At this point there was a rustling from the sofa. The pocket lamp shows me a Hermit Crab. After I had expedited this to the water with a crafty swing, a wild sow grunted around my tent. It can be easily understood that it was impossible now to think of sleeping.'[3]

Ultimately the Germans and their captives were safe and relatively comfortable. Yet things were not altogether well in Seeadlerdorf, and Haldor Smith argued that many of the men would have welcomed capture and internment, as he later recalled: 'The Germans didn't relish their plight and if one had their confidence it was easy to hear them express a wish of capture – not by the British, but by an American

warship. They were no more anxious of the Stars and Stripes over a cruiser than we Americans were ourselves.'[4]

How true this was is impossible to say. Smith was an American and a patriot, and he doubtless felt duty-bound to state that the Germans were a dissatisfied rabble, and he did this frequently in his reminiscences. What was true was that the men had been away from home a very long time and the yoke of discipline was inevitably slipping off their shoulders.

Perhaps the most obvious casualty of the seductive ennui of the island was Doctor Pietsch, who had always been a heavy drinker and now seemed to have fully immersed himself. Things came to a head when his fellow officers detailed him to 'look after' the booze while they were away from the camp, with the result that he succeeded in getting disgracefully drunk and encouraged the other men (who doubtless needed very little encouragement) to get drunk too.

For von Luckner, maintaining discipline and keeping up morale was only part of the problem: he found captivity purgatory and his lively mind soon grew restless as the days slipped by. He was eager to go raiding again and he still possessed both a crew and plentiful amounts of weaponry. All he lacked was a ship, and as he and his officers contemplated the view from the veranda of their new saloon, they assessed the options in front of them. They knew they had to capture a ship, and perhaps the easiest solution was simply to sit on the island and wait for one to arrive.

A discussion with the four natives had revealed that a boat generally came once a year to the islands to pick up copra and deliver any post. The four men were a bit hazy as to when it had last visited, but they reckoned six months had passed, which meant that six months remained before it would turn up again.[5] To von Luckner and his officers, this seemed like a lifetime. The other option was to go and find a boat. The *Seeadler* had

been equipped with a pair of motorised launches, both 18 feet long. The motors had only enough range to be used to go in and out of port, but it would be simple enough to rig up some sails and then head out in search of a likely-looking schooner that they could seize and use to go raiding on once more. It wasn't necessarily the most prudent course of action, but it didn't take long for von Luckner and his officers to decide that the only sane choice was to head to sea in a small open boat in search of fresh adventure. But first they had to get their boat ready.

The long passage around Cape Horn to the South Seas had not been kind to the ship's boats, and both of them were distinctly the worse for wear. A combination of heavy use when boarding captured ships punctuated with weeks and months of either sweltering heat or blistering cold had opened up the seams in the planking and they leaked badly. The men got to work repairing the hull of one, while masts were shaped and sails cut and stitched using canvas from the *Seeadler*. By late August, after just three weeks on the island, Germany's smallest raider was ready to take to the seas. She was named the *Kronprinzessin Cecilie*, although this was not painted on the hull for fear of betraying her crew's identity.

Von Luckner describes the craft that they hoped would keep them safe over many miles of open ocean:

> *The boat was open, about six metres long and lay amidships only 28 centimeters above water. But one thing, it could float! The seafarers can judge how little protection she provided, but also anyone who has rented a boat on his home river or lake can imagine how it would be to pack such a boat with equipment for a few weeks, add in a dozen companions and then go into the unknown on the high seas.*

*We had some of the canned meat, bacon, etc, but in the main store the food consisted only of hard bread and water. Nautical apparatus and sextants were installed. We also took the hand-held harmonium and a book to read.*

*We had supplies for two months, water for three weeks. I must now describe the structure of our new home. As our boat was so crowded that we could only come aft from the front on all fours, we had packed our hard bread into the side buoyancy tanks along with the water, photographic apparatus, and the necessary tobacco. These buoyancy tanks were the only place which was guaranteed to be dry even in bad weather, but the floatability of the boat suffered considerably. We had four mattresses, so that four men could be laid out at the same time, but two of them were only half, because if one was on the two front mattresses, one's legs always became entangled between the rope and other tools. We had six enamel plates, six pairs of knives and forks, six mugs, a coffee pot, 20,000 marks, and some rolls of toilet paper. The toilet, however, consisted of the bow of the boat, which often submerged in the ship's pounding movements. It was a flush of the most penetrating kind, but often premature; one had to hold on to a thin stay, which caused the body to be thrown back and forth while the ship was rolling. More terrible than these external difficulties was the hardness that arose from the lack of movement and the bread and water.*

*The water containers plus the engine took up most of the remaining space. Thus it is difficult to understand how six people were able to fit at all. In order to have some protection against the rain and the sea, we had nailed a wide canvas around the boat at*

*the gunwale and a couple of iron cross beams held it in place. This was folded over in bad weather to keep the spray out and without this precaution, we would often have been defeated and almost certainly drowned.*[6]

The plan was to head to the island of Atui, some 300 miles distant, with a crew of six of the fittest and most capable men, all armed. They would pose as Dutch-American explorers who had undertaken a trip across the South Seas as part of a bet. This disguise would be used until the opportune moment came to capture an unsuspecting ship. Rough calculations suggested a passage time of no more than a few days to Atui, but all were aware that the voyage was fraught with risk and could take much longer.

The crew consisted of von Luckner himself, Lieutenant Kircheiss, *Steuermann* (coxswain) Lüdemann, Lieutenant Krause, *Obermaat* (Petty Officer) Permien and *Obermatrose* (Able Seaman) Erdemann. On Mopelia, the command passed to Lieutenant Kling, who had the unenviable task of keeping the men and prisoners in hand until the adventurers returned.

Kling was given very clear instructions as to what to do once they had departed. If he had the opportunity, he was to capture a ship, but, in the meantime, he was to stand by and monitor the wireless continuously. If, after three months, von Luckner hadn't returned or had been captured, then Kling was to fit out the second ship's boat and set out with his own party. Three months was not an arbitrary length of time; it would be at this point that the *Seeadler*'s supplies would run out and the men would be left entirely reliant on foraging to get by.

The moment of departure came, and it is recalled somewhat sardonically by Haldor Smith:

> *It was on August 23, three weeks after the grounding of the Seeadler, that Graf von Luckner lined up his tatterdemalion gang for the last parade, and with much pomp, his officers about him, gave a final talking to the men with a great deal about the Fatherland in it.*
>
> *Then he and his small picked party boarded the motor boat that had been rigged as a sloop and stocked as tight as could be, and to the singing of songs and great cheers – and a great many curses from the men underneath, for they wished as little success as he had in his venture, though it must be said that he took it not without a good deal of courage – the motor boat slipped out the channel and before long the glint of her sail was lost to the sight of the most persistent watcher in the highest palm.*[7]

All of those remaining on the island must have wondered if they would ever see their commander again.

# 12
# 2,500 MILES IN AN OPEN BOAT

The decision to head to Atui was a simple one, as it meant running before the south-east trade winds that blew steadily from that quadrant day after day. Von Luckner and his men were also fortunate in that they were sailing in late August, as hurricane season did not begin until November, giving them some margin of safety. September was also noted as a dry month, which would make the voyage a little more comfortable. However, only the most reckless of men would not have felt a tingle of fear and regret as they swung out of the lagoon, slipped past the mournful shattered hull of the *Seeadler*, still groaning on her deathbed, and squared away for Atui and the unknown.

With a fair wind in their sails, Mopelia receded rapidly over the horizon. Six men in an 18-foot open boat were always going to be up against it. This was obvious as soon as she cleared the lee of the land and started to rise and fall to the big Pacific swells with great dizzying leaps and swoops. Right from the off, the boat leaked and von Luckner reckoned that they bailed about 40 bucketloads of water out of her each day. It was going to be a trying passage.

In theory, the trip wouldn't take more than a few days, provided the trade winds held and their navigation was sufficiently accurate. If they

missed Atui, they could drive on into the South Seas, for there were millions of islands to choose from. Aboard the *Kronprinzessin* there was probably also a slight lightening of the mood following departure. There is plenty of evidence that the senior officers were a tight-knit and comradely bunch and it is quite conceivable that leaving their disgruntled crew behind was something of a relief.

The six men settled in to their new routine as best they could, as von Luckner records:

*In the morning at six o'clock, the two watch members filled the coffee pot. Heating this was accomplished under the most difficult circumstances with a blow torch. As soon as there was a breeze and the boat was lurching, it was not possible to bring the water to a boil; then instead of coffee we had to be grateful for warm coffee or 'coffee bean soup' as we called it.*

*In the later terrible days of this boat trip, we did not have anything warm to eat but boat life in the first days was altogether more pleasant. At eight o'clock the four other crew members got up from their camp, washed themselves with salt water, and when everyone had done their ablutions we sat down and took the coffee with hard-boiled tarts. Then the morning run was calculated, 'beds' made, mugs washed and knives sharpened. At ten o'clock in the morning we were able to indulge in spiritual interests and, as our library was only for one, Lüdemann established himself as a reader, and gave us the best of the Journey to Constantinople. Fritz Reuter [the author] was pretty much the only thing that managed to keep us dry throughout the trip.*

*At about 12 o'clock, nautical activities were again carried out, the provisions for lunch were fished out of the locker and*

*the dinner was made. The afternoon was usually unpleasant; in the heat, without shade and always sitting uncomfortably. We had to be frugal with water; you could never completely quench your thirst.*

*Later in the afternoon, something was read and a diary was written; we gossiped and drank in the evening and did a bit of singing too. Many an old German folk-song resounded out across the vast ocean. At night it was usually very cool, but we did not notice it until early in the morning, as long as our clothes were dry. It was uncomfortable when a whale was spotted nearby as we did not like the proximity of its spouts.*

*The navigation proved to be quite difficult in such a tiny vessel. You cannot put the charts on any table, everything is blowing over at the slightest carelessness. If we laid our nautical tables, notebooks, maps, logarithms and books, which were wet, to dry in the sun, they steamed like horse carcasses.*[1]

Despite the difficulty of navigating, Kircheiss proved his worth on this trip, and three days of this tenuous existence brought them to Atui, a low-lying disc of land about two square miles in size. To the men aboard the little boat, it must have felt like a miracle to see it there in the distance, yet they were all aware that there was no guarantee of a friendly reception. They could not relax or let their guard down, and as the island slowly grew and took shape throughout the day, they methodically worked through the cover story that they would present to the authorities. The slightly tenuous Dutch American disguise was far from ideal, as the basic plan was to continue to speak German, just with a slightly Dutch twang in their accent. If they met anyone who actually

spoke Dutch – or German for that matter – the game would be well and truly up and, although they were armed with machine guns, they would be of use only provided they steered clear of big ports where a militia might be able to overpower them.

Upon landing in Atui, they immediately struck it lucky. At the time, the island was under British occupancy and this gave the Germans considerable confidence. Some things never change, and back then the British had as poor a reputation for learning foreign languages as they do today. Von Luckner was able to approach the leading British official, who was either too indolent to check out their story or thoroughly taken in by a group of Germans speaking to each other in a Dutch accent. This was made all the more ludicrous when he mentioned that he had fought in the Boer War. Either way, he did not ask to see any papers.

The unlikely group was able to explore the island, establishing that there were no ships anchored off, and that no one had the faintest idea of when one would arrive. There seemed little choice but to proceed with their voyage, and after loading up with bananas, coconuts and fresh water, they shoved off their little cockleshell of a boat and once more headed out into the Pacific – doubtless with a certain amount of trepidation.

It was around this time that news started to circulate back to Europe and the USA that the *Seeadler* had been lost. This must have come as a pleasant surprise to the British Admiralty who, since the *Seeadler* had slipped past the *Otranto* off Cape Horn, had essentially lost interest in the raider, being fully occupied with affairs in the Atlantic. It was as if, once the *Seeadler* passed into the Pacific, the Admiralty had simply closed the door on the whole incident. Who exactly promulgated the rather

far-fetched report of her demise is not clear, for, while it was factually correct regarding the loss of the raider, nothing else about the story added up. The report read as follows:

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## GERMAN RAIDER SEEADLER SUNK BY A WARSHIP. PART OF THE CREW LOST.

NEW YORK, Friday, August 23

The British steamship Harrington Head has reported that a British warship sank the German raider *Seeadler* in the Atlantic, 1000 miles from this port. The *Seeadler* went down fighting, and part of the crew were lost at their posts. The warship summoned the Harrington Head and also the British steamer Edith Cavell, to take on board the rescued Germans. The Harrington Head is now homeward bound, and is reported to have 13 Germans on board.

This was evidently a spot of propaganda perpetrated by either the British or the Americans, and probably based on the fact that things had gone very quiet as far as the *Seeadler* was concerned. In addition to boosting morale back home, by easing fears about a raider at large, insurance premiums would also drop.

An entire ocean away from where they were supposed to be captured, the *Seeadler*'s crew was still desperately avoiding the authorities. The next logical place to aim for was Rarotonga, which was the administrative heart of the Cook Islands and a far more lively port than Atui. Here, they were pretty much guaranteed to find a ship; the only question would be whether it was a wise spot to capture one, as there was a greater risk of well-armed authorities being in the vicinity. The plan was therefore to

sail for Rarotonga and possibly land if the coast was clear, but head on to Aitutaki if things looked threatening.

This next section of the voyage was dogged by poor weather, with stormy seas, waterspouts and torrential downpours. Everything aboard was drenched, and von Luckner estimated that, at the height of the gale, they were bailing out around 250 bucketloads of water an hour. Now the suffering really began, for there was not a dry patch to be found aboard the boat. Lying on sodden mattresses was extremely unpleasant, while at night the men shivered in the cool air. After a couple of days of this hell, Rarotonga was sighted and all felt a mix of relief and trepidation as they neared the island in the gathering dusk. This was a big port where the authorities might be lying in wait. Would they be caught and captured?

Approaching at night provided them with cover, but also made for a deeply disorientating experience, and as they neared the port of Avarua, they received a nasty jolt. As they peered desperately into the gloom, a gigantic dark shadow reared up in front of them: the huge bows of a steamship anchored off and showing no lights at all. She was black, menacing and eerie in the near impenetrable gloom. Why were no lights shown? Why was she lurking just outside the harbour in this unlikely spot? Instinctively, the Germans sensed a trap; this must be a British cruiser awaiting their arrival. Despite their desperate need for comfort, a dry bed and dry land on which to stretch their aching, bruised bodies, they swung sharply away from Rarotonga, hearts in mouths, and set a course for Aitutaki, another 300-mile slog to the east.

The night can play tricks on all of us, and had von Luckner and his men approached Avarua in daylight, the steamer would have revealed a less menacing secret. She was the *MaiTai*, a British steamship that had

stranded on the reef outside Avarua on 25 December 1916, the very day that the *Seeadler* was boarded by the British authorities in the Atlantic.

The disorientated Germans sailed on, pursued by imaginary British cruisers, which cannot have eased their concerns about visiting Aitutaki. It hadn't helped that, at Atui, a French missionary had informed them that there were a few Dutchmen on the island, so they should have some friends. It was therefore clear that a new cover story would be required.

The 31st of August 1917 began as just another day in paradise for Thomas Duncan, chief magistrate of Aitutaki; the morning had dawned hot and sleepy, and Duncan had looked out over his island idyll with the usual mixture of contentment and ennui. Days had a tendency to blur into one on the islands, and weeks and months could go by without anything out of the ordinary happening.

Duncan was British, and his rank of Chief Magistrate meant he was a man of great importance on the island, yet it often felt like a merely ceremonial title. Aside from attending social functions, going to church once a week, and signing the odd official document, there was precious little else for him to do. Certainly the war had made little impact on anyone out here; it might just as well have been taking place on the moon.

Despite the extremely slow pace of life, Duncan remained a dutiful official. He was here with his wife and daughter, and perhaps this marital stability had prevented his descent into the bouts of dissipation that often slowly destroyed expats in this part of the world. He had simply settled into the sleepy, hypnotic rhythm of the place and got on with life. Yet, on that late August day, he found that rhythm disrupted. It began with a baffling report of a group of Norwegian sailors arriving in a small open boat with some obscure tale about sailing across the Pacific as part of a

bet. Strange things happen in the South Seas every day, Duncan knew that all too well, but this story sounded almost beyond belief. He headed down to the water's edge to find out what was really going on.

What he found were six men, all looking rather the worse for wear, who did indeed claim to be Norwegian. Their story went as follows: they were a group of Norwegians who had made a bet in a Dutch club in San Francisco that they could sail from Honolulu to the Society Islands and back. They were accompanied by an American journalist by the name of Southard, who was covering the story for the *Harrods Magazine*. In the circumstances, you could understand why Duncan was a touch suspicious.

Duncan asked the men for their passports and they seemed most taken aback, stating it had not occurred to them to bring passports on such a trip. Given that there was a war on, this was even more suspicious. The first test was to confirm whether they were actually Norwegian. As luck would have it, there was a Norwegian resident on the island and he was called for to have a chat with these odd visitors. He confirmed that the men did indeed speak Norwegian, but added that something did not feel right.

The question was, what to do? The decision was taken to split the party up by inviting them to various different houses for a meal, question them, and then compare notes to see if their story still added up. The Norwegians were hesitant, but eventually agreed to go, enjoying hearty lunches at various houses in the village while their hosts asked them incessant questions. At the end of the meal, Duncan hurried off and compared notes with his fellow hosts. The story still stacked up, however, and all were more confused than ever. The Norwegians asked if they could stay the night, but refused the offer of accommodation, preferring to stick to their boat.

Duncan retired to bed that night with strong misgivings. Sleep usually came like a drug in the islands, but he spent an uneasy night, and awoke to the problem the next day none the wiser. He was in a bit of a corner: there were no weapons on the entire island, so if he did have to deal with the 'Norwegians' by force it was going to be difficult – a couple of them looked pretty imposing. To make matters worse, some islanders had already jumped to the conclusion that the new arrivals were German, possibly escaped prisoners from a different island, but Duncan was unsure of that too.

It struck Duncan that the easiest solution would just be to send them on their way and make them someone else's problem. Yet, by now the local populace had been riled, demanding that Duncan do something about the men who, by this point, were hurriedly buying supplies. Reluctantly, he summoned the boat's skipper and asked for the ship's papers. The Norwegian skipper became impatient and there was a certain aggression in his manner that scared Duncan, who sought to pacify him. 'People think you're Germans. I know you're not, but want to soothe the people.' It was agreed they would head down to the boat together to get the ship's papers.

In all his years as magistrate, Duncan had never had to do anything; now was his moment to prove himself. Yet, he felt paralysed, his heart thumping, thrown off kilter by these strangers who had brought disorder to his peaceful island. Walking along the jetty to the boat, he was hailed by a fellow Englishman, who asked Duncan when he was going to arrest the newcomers. As they hurried past, he felt the Norwegian grip his arm with steely strength and whisper, 'Do that and I'll shoot the guy.'

Duncan's blood ran cold. 'Don't talk like that,' he replied in a voice that he hoped was not quavering. Back at the boat, he asked to see the

logbook. He really just wanted rid of these men at any cost now, but he didn't want to lose face in front of the rest of the villagers. The skipper produced a logbook of sorts, but it made precious little sense – just a jumble of navigational notes written in English. As he leafed through it, a small pamphlet fell out. Duncan opened it up. On the very first page was the Imperial Eagle of Germany, and beneath it was written 'German Navy'.

Duncan didn't need to see any more, but the Norwegians ushered him nearer to the boat. There was something they wanted him to see. They lifted up the canvas cover, urging him to look underneath. Duncan's blood curdled as he saw the cold, dull steel of the muzzle of a machine gun and a selection of Mausers, hand grenades and bandoliers of bullets. He withdrew in horror, meanwhile uttering assurances to the crowd gathered on the pier that the Norwegians were harmless. 'It is best you go now,' he said weakly to the 'Norwegians'. 'Please don't take me with you,' he added.[2]

The odd bunch of sailors shoved off and disappeared slowly over the horizon. That evening, in the comfort of his study, with wife and daughter safe beside him, Thomas Duncan sat down and wrote a letter to the consulate of the Cook Islands detailing the 'mysterious foreigners'[3] he had encountered. He retired to bed, hoping that the following day would be just another in paradise, and that normality and torpor would return. A small steely finger of the Great War had pried its way into Aitutaki and he, for one, was glad to see the back of it. Duncan would later be criticised in reports over his performance, but did not lose his job over the encounter.[4]

The *Kronprinzessin* sailed on, plunging into the unknown. The next spot to aim for was Fiji, some 1,000 miles away across open ocean. The odds did not look good for von Luckner and his men. Because of the rather fraught situation at Aitutaki, they had not been able to re-provision particularly

satisfactorily. In addition, the men had not given themselves long enough ashore in Mopelia to fully recover from the privations of the latter part of that voyage aboard the *Seeadler*. Now, with another long voyage ahead of them, they started to really suffer, as von Luckner recalled:

*The most terrible time of suffering we should now endure on this part of the voyage, heavy battles with the elements, day and night without sleep, just busy holding the boat against the stormy weather above water and exhausting the water in the boat with buckets.*

*For three days we passed through a pumice field, which was ejected by a volcano lying under water. Here lay the source of the seaquake which had destroyed our* Seeadler *[although this tsunami is unverified]. The weather had also taken a turn for the worse and it rained frequently. I can be wet by day when I have a bunk in the evening, but there was no roof on the boat and no shelter. At night, the body smoked as a result of the cold. By now our diet was only water and hard bread. We fell into deep exhaustion. The mattresses we had long since thrown overboard because they no longer dried. In the course of the day the heat of the sun burned on the skin and at night there was no other protection from the wet cold.*

*The water supplies were scarce, and we never dared to quench our thirst. Even the delicious bacon which we had we were no longer allowed to touch as it made us too thirsty. Meanwhile the broad expanse of water continually mocked us and reminded us of thirst. Initially we had collected rainwater in the sail, but we had to give up soon, as the sail was as salt-coated as everything in the boat, and gave only brackish water. We unconsciously got used to sucking on the fingers and gnawing our hands to refresh the dry palate with saliva.*

*Having only just recovered from scurvy we were vulnerable to the illness and soon succumbed. Our joints were swollen, especially the knee joints. We could not stand anymore. Our tongues were swollen, gums were snow-white, teeth loose and aching, and all we had to chew on was hard bread! What would have been given for a hot meal, a dry camp, a little free movement, or else a modest recovery! After all, man is not an amphibian. We also suffered a great deal of pain when the heavily swollen knee joints struck when the boat came to and fro. We became indifferent, why should we strive to save our lives? In such days death is always there, always imagined.*[5]

On the 22nd day of their voyage, the island of Katafanga was sighted. It was one of the easternmost islands of the Fijis, sparsely populated and just a small dot in the great infinity of the Pacific Ocean. Yet, to von Luckner and his men, it represented salvation of a kind. They had sailed well over 2,000 miles in an open boat. It was a remarkable achievement – particularly given their weakened state, combined with the fact that, wherever they had stopped on the way, they hadn't been able to relax or drop their guard even an inch. That was about to change.

To their intense relief, the crew were able to land undetected at Katafanga, and simple pleasures, such as walking up and down the beach, took on an entirely new significance to the exhausted men. Presently, they struck inland and were extremely fortunate to find what appeared to be an abandoned house. From what the men could gather, it had been owned by a German planter prior to the war, and they deduced that he had been driven out when hostilities began. For their purposes, it was perfect.

For two days, they relaxed and recovered, enjoying the sheer luxury of sleeping on mattresses between soft sheets. After so many days in an open

boat on very strict rations, all were showing signs of malnourishment and scurvy. All the crew had been weakened by the lack of fresh fruit and vegetables aboard the *Seeadler* during the latter weeks of the cruise and had only just been regaining their strength prior to setting out aboard the *Kronprinzessin*.

Upon their departure, von Luckner left a sum of money to cover the cost of the goods they had used and also a note of apology for breaking into the house. In the note, he explains he is an English writer on a sporting cruise. The letter is signed 'Max Pemberton' and is displayed to this day in the Ovalau Club on the nearby island of Levuka, where the owner of the 'borrowed' villa, a Mr Stockwell (who was not, after all, German), was a member.

Suitably refreshed after this unexpectedly luxurious break, the sailors pressed on. Now that they were within the Fijian Islands, they were confident of finding a new raider; it was just a case of capturing the right vessel. They shaped a course for the island of Wakaya, where there was a possibility of available shipping for them to steal.

It was on this latest leg of the voyage that all aboard nearly met their end. They were cruising slowly towards Wakaya as darkness fell, and the pattern of islands had now become intricate. They decided to heave-to and await morning light before attempting a tricky piece of navigation. A lookout was set and the crew settled down for another uncomfortable night grovelling around on the bottom boards of their wretched vessel.

The off watch was awoken with the first light of dawn by the lookout, who was genuinely terrified. It appeared that, throughout the night, a current had taken them towards land and they were now perilously close to a lee shore. Despite the sails being set, it was evident that it was going to be

touch and go as to whether they could clear the outlying reef. A heavy swell was breaking on this reef, and if they failed to clear it, their boat would be smashed to matchwood and they would surely also be killed by the impact.

Minutes slipped agonisingly by as they tried to coax the *Kronprinzessin* away from the reef to safety. By now, the roar of the surf was deafening and all aboard sat transfixed by the great rollers that curled up and thundered down on the reef. Slowly, agonisingly slowly, the little boat slipped past the reef and was safe once more.

The castaways arrived at Wakaya and were greeted warmly enough, but they had been there only a matter of minutes before they sensed the all-pervasive suspicion that had been so stifling at Aitutaki, with one man in particular badgering them about their nationality. As on Aitutaki, they knew they had weapons enough to take the entire island, but their own physical strength was failing. They knew they had to capture a ship soon or the game was up. Fortunately, there were a couple of schooners in the bay, and although they didn't exactly inspire confidence, they would serve better than the *Kronprinzessin* as a raider, that was for sure.

The men spent the day trying to charm the locals, and, by and large, failed to do so. They also failed to notice when a small sailing cutter sped out of the bay into the teeth of an impending storm. That night, four of them slept ashore, while two anchored the *Kronprinzessin* offshore and kept guard. It was as well they did, for during the night, the anchor line was cut by the locals and the little boat run ashore on the orders of the local police officer. As the *Kronprinzessin* ran aground, the two men left to guard her were rudely awakened, but managed to drive off the intruders with pistols. It was time to leave.

The following day, von Luckner approached the skipper of one of the schooners and asked if he could possibly tow them to Suva in exchange for

a small fee. The skipper agreed to this, and the plan was simply to get a few miles offshore before capturing the schooner. Fate intervened, and shortly after leaving Wakaya, the schooner was struck by a vicious squall. With the threat of worse weather to come on the horizon, her skipper decided the only option was to run back to Wakaya. For whatever reason, von Luckner and his men allowed this to happen and by evening she was again at anchor. Here, von Luckner and his men again had a chance to seize her, yet again refrained. Von Luckner later explained that this was beacause a new ship, the *Gleaner A*, had arrived in Wakaya in the meantime.

The *Gleaner A* was much newer and smarter and also had auxiliary engines. She would, von Luckner figured, make an excellent raider. He planned to take her using the same tactic of requesting a tow and the crew waited on the morrow to execute the plan. It was a fatal error. That night was to be their last as free men for many months, and the details of the capture are well documented in this newspaper report of the time.

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## THE SEE ADLER: HOW HER CAPTAIN WAS CAUGHT.

Sydney, October 28.

A correspondent of the Sydney 'Daily Telegraph' in Suva, Fiji, has dispatched the following story of the capture of Count von Luckner, of the sea raider, *See Adler*, his lieutenant, and some members of the *See Adler*'s crew on the day they landed there. On Friday evening, September 21, there landed, under an armed guard, at the Queen's Wharf, Suva, six Germans, two being officers in naval uniform. They had been captured that morning on the northern side of Wakaya Island, between Yiti Lera and Vanua Leru.

They were then, in a 24 ft. power boat, armed to the teeth with machine guns, rifles and a supply of bombs, and their capture was the result of a brilliant piece of bluff on the part of the officers concerned, Sub-Inspector H. C. Hills and Inspector A. E. Howard. On Thursday word had been brought by a half-caste to Levuka, that a party of strange Europeans were at Wakaya, that they refused to talk to the natives, and had taken possession of a cutter there. Sub-Inspector Hills, with a party of Fijians, set out from Levuka in a cutter. Bad weather, much to their good fortune, as it turned out, compelled them to turn back. By this time, the steamer *Amra* (A.U.S.N. Company), a boat of about 300 tons, put in an appearance at Levuka, and she was requisitioned. Early on Friday morning she came to Wakaya and as she made for the entrance the strange boat could be seen making for the passage. A 22-ft. boat was lowered, and into this went Sub-Inspector Hills and his party of Fijians, six in number. Inspector N. E. Howard had joined the party by now. The only weapons they had were an ordinary Colt revolver and an automatic pistol. The Fijians were not armed, though they were in the uniform of the constabulary. They made straight for the strange boat and cut across its bows. Sub-Inspector Hills stood up and challenged them. By this time he saw they were in German uniform. 'I call on you to surrender in the name of the King,' he said. He made no attempt to draw his revolver, which was still at his hip. 'Who are you?' came the response in excellent English. 'What do you belong to?' 'I call on you to surrender,' was the quick reply. 'I do not wish to parley.' After some hesitation,

the reply came. The Germans, for such they turned out to be, surrendered. They then suggested that they should tow the other boat to the *Amra*, but Sub-Inspector Hills was taking no chances. After accepting the leader's automatic revolver, and disarming the rest of the men, he ordered them into his boat, all but one, whom he retained to run the engine, a motor engine. The other boat, with one German prisoner in it, was then towed to the *Amra* now lying near by. When they boarded the *Amra* it became apparent to the Germans they had been bluffed. There was not a weapon of any kind, much less a gun. The only weapons were those in the possession of the two officers, and their own boat was practically chock-full of weapons and munitions. 'We did not come this distance to be captured by an unarmed boat,' exclaimed the leader.

They were brought to Suva and disembarked at night on the wharf. They marched through the streets, which were crowded with Europeans, Indians, and Fijians. For a time all went well until an Indian called out in tones of disgust 'Baby-killers,' and for a time it was bedlam let loose, the Indians and Fijians giving vent to their feelings. The leader claims to be Count von Luckner. He declares that he was in the battle of Jutland, and escaped from Germany in the *See Adler*, which was operating off Brazil. His story is that his vessel caught fire in the Pacific, and they had travelled 2,000 miles in the boat after abandoning the *See Adler*. He says, it is stated, that there are other boats from the vessel, but he will give no idea where they are. At the time of writing there are rumours that another party is at large somewhere on Viti Levu. The military are under arms,

> and search parties have been organised. Von Luckner claims that he had not taken any lives, although he says the life of one boy from a captured vessel was lost accidentally through a falling spar. He declares he has sunk 23 ships, five in the Pacific. In his boat were found many charts and logs belonging to other vessels but the Government have not permitted any information to be disclosed in this direction. The crews of the vessel sunk in the Pacific, von Luckner says, he has landed, and has, it is understood, made known the locality to the Governor. A story is told that the party called at one of the Cook Islands, where they obtained provisions, for which they paid in gold and insisted on having a receipt. As a matter of fact, there were some hundreds of pounds in gold in the boat, and the usual excellent cigars and champagne.

It was a cruel irony for von Luckner, king of the hoax, to be duped at the last by a handful of policemen armed with two pistols between the lot of them. He and his fellow officers must have been kicking themselves as they awaited their fate. It appeared their adventures were over. Von Luckner himself fumed over his untimely surrender and later reflected that exhaustion must have played its part, arguing that their long ordeal in an open boat had robbed them of some of their vitality and wits. In the circumstances it is possibly a fair surmise. Yet it was of precious little consolation to von Luckner as he sat in his cell in Suva awaiting his fate. He could only hope that the British treated him and his men with the same courtesy with which he had treated his own prisoners of war.

# 13
# THE CASTAWAYS' ESCAPE

While von Luckner and his party had been defying the odds in an open boat, things had not gone entirely smoothly for the shore party. Its leader, Alfred Kling, had found himself sorely tried in his attempts to keep the camp running smoothly. He had watched the *Kronprinzessin* recede over the horizon with mixed feelings of trepidation and a determination to make things work. He was a thorough officer who all too often had been eclipsed by others. This was his chance to shine. Yet, right from the start, it felt like things were working against him. Both Mother Nature and human nature threatened to throw everything into chaos on more than one occasion.

Kling was an interesting character. He had already achieved a measure of fame as part of the *Deutschland* expedition which, in 1911, had penetrated deep into the Weddell Sea – further, in fact, than anyone had gone before. The trip, however, had not been a happy one owing to the dynamics of the party on the *Deutschland*. The ship had been commanded by the somewhat loathsome Richard Vahsel, and the expedition had been led by Wilhelm Filchner, already a famed explorer, who had hand-picked Kling.

The plan to map a large section of the Antarctic coast was stymied when the *Deutschland* became embayed in pack ice for a full eight months.

During this time, Filchner, Kling and a third man, Konig, had set out into the wilderness to investigate the truth behind earlier claims of the existence of a great land mass sighted by Benjamin Morrell back in 1823. The three travelled over the ice largely by moonlight, and it was Kling who successfully navigated them back to the ship, correctly calculating the drift of the *Deutschland* in the pack ice.

Although the expedition was hailed a success in Germany, in reality it had been riven with internal divisions. Kling had found himself in the middle of a monumental spat between Filchner and Vahsel which had split the crew into two warring parties. In fact, Kling had been brought out to join the party in order to take over from Vahsel in the early stages of the expedition after Vahsel had fallen out with a number of expedition members and resigned while the ship was still in Buenos Aires. Sadly for Kling (and Filchner), Vahsel changed his mind, and by the time Kling got to Buenos Aires, he was no longer required. However, Kling opted to go along on the trip anyway.

While the *Deutschland* was in the pack ice, Kling was given another chance to gain command when Vahsel died – officially from a heart attack, but more likely from syphilis, which he was known to suffer from. But yet again, Kling was denied his chance of command, as the divisions within the ship meant that Filchner felt he had no choice but to appoint Wilhelm Lorenzen, one of Vahsel's party, as the new captain.

The party became so deeply divided that by the time they finally made it back to South Georgia, Filchner was genuinely afraid for his life and had taken to sleeping on the floor of his cabin, rather than in his bunk, for fear Lorentzen or one of his cronies would shoot him through the bulkhead. The expedition's only real achievement was to demonstrate that South Greenland did not exist.

It must have left Kling with the feeling of being something of a nearly man. Already deprived of the command of the *Seeadler* because he was a Imperial Navy Reservist, he had nevertheless served von Luckner faithfully and now had his chance to shine. He had 55 men under his command along with the two other remaining officers, Pries and Dr Pietsch, and he felt the burden of responsibility, yet also firmly believed he was up to the job.

One of Kling's initial problems, however, was Pries. He had been left behind with good reason by von Luckner, and proved himself to be a constant thorn in Kling's side. He struggled to respect Kling's authority and was frequently at odds with his new leader. For Kling's part, it probably still rankled that Pries had been responsible for the *Seeadler* when she had been wrecked.

As for his other officer, Dr Pietsch, many witnesses from the captured American schooners attest to the fact that he was essentially a drunken sot for most of the time he was on the island, and he can have been of precious little use to Kling. Yet there was work to be done. Von Luckner had given Kling the onerous task of removing one of the *Seeadler*'s four-inch guns and transporting it onto the beach so that it could be installed on their next raider, should they manage to capture one. This was a highly unenviable task; the gun might have looked small enough alongside a battleship's armament, but was a massively unwieldy lump of iron to be moving around using a lifeboat. It was obvious that to use the ship's boat would have been folly, so Kling set about chopping down palm trees in order to build a raft. Here again, he was foiled by the strong current pouring out of the atoll. There was no way they were going to be able to stem this while dragging a very heavy gun on a rather flimsy raft. Kling conceded defeat and turned his attention to the *Seeadler*'s masts.

The masts of the *Seeadler* were around 150 feet high and highly conspicuous: a tall ship with masts this size had no place in the South Seas. The *Seeadler* was well off the normal windjammer routes and anyone searching for the raider couldn't have been given a more useful signpost. Kling therefore detailed Pries to go aboard and set dynamite charges within the masts in order to bring them down. It seemed like a simple enough plan, and Pries was well versed in this sort of work in his role as prize officer. On 30 August, he and a handful of men boarded the *Seeadler* and fixed four blasting cartridges to the mainmast. The explosion brought down both main and mizzen successfully, but had another unforeseen effect: the diesel exhaust vents had been left open, and shortly after the explosion it was clear that this oversight had started a fire in the diesel tank.

Initially, Pries and his men tried to fight the fire, but the knowledge that there were still plenty of shells in the *Seeadler*'s magazine meant it wasn't long before they prudently beat a hasty retreat. As they headed back to shore, the *Seeadler* began to blaze, the shells exploding in her forward sections with great muffled roars that ruptured her plating. Great black gouts of thick smoke poured from her hull many miles up into the sky. If they had wished to send a smoke signal, they couldn't have done a better job, and there were fears that it might even be visible in Papeete.

Haldor Smith described the scene with an inevitable bias as follows:

> *I was on one of the most distant stretches of the beach trying to get some fun and excitement out of the business of flipping turtles on their back and maybe getting a bit of steak when there was a roar that fairly set every tree on the island aquiver. 'By the Lord!' I cried, jumping as if a shell had landed in the sand a yard from me, and the*

*first thought that came to me was that fuss button of a souse doctor had gone to sleep in the magazine with a lighted cigar in his hand.*

*And there, across the blue lagoon and the fringe of palms beyond and the little tiny island off the channel where the ship had gone ashore, there was already a great lump of oily smoke, the lower parts of it a dull red and bright yellow by turns, and of the raider herself there was little to be seen.*

*At that I flung my hat in the air and higher than the coconut trees and let out a yell in answer to the blast that would have carried against the wind in a hurricane. Whether by design or not (and if anyone can say, they won't, because it would mean a quick trial and the sentence of treachery in wartime) the explosion reached the safety vents for the fuel tanks and a single flame swept the ship.*

*There were 300 tons of oil in the hold taken on in the first place for the diesel engines. Kling was dancing mad, but he couldn't do anything to stop the fire and all that night the island from the channel to the farthermost reach of the seven mile diameter was light with the flare of the burning* Seeadler *and every hour we were set atingle by new explosions which sent flames shooting so high that it seemed they might be seen even from Tahiti, 250 miles away.*[1]

That night, the men sat on the beach and watched the *Seeadler* burn a bright, furious orange against the starlit sky, the sea purple and flecked blood red. She was a mournful, eerie sight – a great funeral pyre that could not help but depress all who watched. It took days for the fire to burn out completely, and when it had, the guns were totally wrecked. All the while, Kling sat and fumed over Pries, who had now not only piled the ship onto the reef, but ensured it was utterly beyond salvage.

Yet, on 1 September, another disaster struck which would put their previous travails into the shade: a great tidal surge hit the island. Whether this was some remnant of a tidal wave or simply a massive tide is unclear. Hans Hansen, who was mate of the *Manila*, describes it simply as 'a high water',[2] essentially an exceptional tide, while Haldor Smith states simply that it was an 'extraordinary tide'.[3]

The upshot was catastrophic as the Germans had placed a large amount of their supplies on the low island on the western side of the atoll. This kept them safe from prying hands and the rats that infested the main island, but it had also left them exceptionally vulnerable. This tidal surge had been more than enough to sweep most of the supplies into the lagoon. Captain Smith was far from sympathetic at this stroke of misfortune and reflected, 'One could have expected it and nobody used to the Pacific would have risked his food there even with the prospect for neap tides instead of the five foot rise that caused the waste. It was a sorry mess that we came upon when we put over in the launch.'[4]

The provisions had been effectively halved, and there was now only enough to feed the 90 or so men for a month. This was a genuinely alarming prospect. Mopelia itself had a rich bounty of food, but its resources were sorely stretched by the huge number of mouths to feed. The prospect of slow starvation did not appeal to Kling, and he felt that action was required.

It did not help that, as the evidence indicates, Kling really was struggling with Pries around this time. It is unclear exactly how difficult things became between the two men, as neither was keen to elaborate on it after the war, but there is a small entry in the war diary by Pries that indicates that he 'did not recognise Kling as acting commander'.[5] This was essentially mutiny, and Kling must have had visions of the *Seeadler*

expedition ending in the same acrimonious shambles as Filchner's Antarctic expedition.

The options were rapidly narrowing for Kling, and on the same day that the tidal surge wiped out many of their provisions, the wireless also brought them unwelcome correspondence from the American Naval Station in Tutuila, to the effect that the *A B Johnson* was missing. This meant that it wouldn't be long before the US Navy was out searching for her. Smith of the *R C Slade* believed that many of the Germans were now hoping that they could wireless for help, resulting in rescue and capture by the American authorities, but this would have been a truly humbling conclusion to such a grand adventure. Lieutenant Kling, however, was a man of dare and had no intention of bowing out in such a prosaic fashion. Besides, he had his own plan if von Luckner did not return, and as each fresh misfortune seemed to narrow their options further, efforts to make the second motorboat seaworthy and prepare it for an ocean crossing were redoubled.

Kling wanted to see his homeland again and he took inspiration from the incredible story of the crew of SMS *Emden*. The *Emden* had been part of Graf von Spee's fleet, which was eventually destroyed off the Falkland Islands. Prior to this, however, the *Emden* had detached herself from the fleet and embarked on a remarkable spree of destruction through the Indian Ocean. This had even included brazenly cruising into Madras and bombarding the city at close range. After sinking 70,825 tons of Allied shipping, including two warships, she was eventually cornered off the Cocos Islands by HMAS *Sydney*. Following an intense running battle, she was severely damaged and run aground.

The survivors were captured and later interned in Malta and Australia, but, unknown to HMAS *Sydney*, a landing party of 53 men from the

*Emden*, led by Hellmuth von Mücke, had been sent onto Direction Island to destroy the wireless there. The landing party had watched with horror when the *Emden* was defeated, and von Mücke had reacted immediately, seizing a three-masted schooner, *Ayesha*, in order to escape the island.

The schooner had not been used for several years and was in a dreadful state of repair; the locals advised von Mücke not to use her as she was not safe. Despite these warnings, von Mücke sailed her to the Dutch port of Padang on Sumatra. Here he resisted internment by cutting gun ports in the *Ayesha*'s wooden hull for their machine guns, which poked conspicuously out of her sides. The authorities thought better of using any kind of force to intern the rogue schooner, and von Mücke was given 24 hours to clear out. During this time he was able to arrange a rendezvous with a German freighter that could take them to the Yemen.

Once crew and weapons were transshipped, the gallant and extremely leaky *Ayesha* was scuttled. Von Mücke's troubles did not end there. After landing at Hoideda in Yemen, he disembarked and eventually managed to negotiate the use of two Arab dhows. One of these was unfortunately wrecked during the tortuous voyage; the party then proceeded on foot along the shores of the Red Sea until they reached Jeddah. During this part of the trip, they were engaged in a three-day running battle with a local Bedouin tribe, which left three of von Mücke's men dead. Having fought off the attack, they arrived in Jeddah and were given protection by the emir there.

Von Mücke became suspicious of the emir's motives, however, and, under cover of night, he and his sailors slipped out of the city aboard another dhow, which took them further up the coast to a small fishing port, Al Wajh. From here, there was another epic march across the Arabian desert to Constantinople, but on 23 May 1915, von Mücke and

his surviving party of 5 officers, 7 petty officers and 30 men arrived there and reported for duty to Admiral Souchon, head of the Imperial Navy's Mediterranean division. From here, after a truly remarkable journey, they were able to take a train back to the Fatherland.

Understandably, von Mücke's incredible escape was already reaching mythical status in Germany, and Kling frequently made mention of it as he tried to exhort his own crew to engineer a similarly miraculous journey. It now looked like the *Seeadler*'s second lifeboat might be the only hope, but on 5 September, a schooner was sighted on the horizon, clearly making for Mopelia. This was what everyone had been hoping for, and Kling reacted very quickly: he loaded up the *Seeadler*'s motorboat with a heavily armed boarding party, who were hidden on the bottom boards beneath a canvas cover.

The schooner proved to be a French trader, the *Lutece*, and she was evidently going to dare the narrow entrance into the lagoon. Kling didn't want that to happen and intercepted her before she got there.

Captain Smith described what happened:

*In the offing was a sail; sure enough a schooner and as she drew in we made out that she was a little island trader. Not very trim to look at and not very promising, yet giving a chance of doing of some kind and perhaps a big outcome at the end.*

*She was just a dirty little trader poking into a South Pacific atoll with her skipper keeping a sharp eye for the dangers in the channel and her mate standing over a dozen crew.*

*She was standing in smartly when the last of the two motorboats put out from Germantown, with Kling himself in command, the machine guns forward and crowded with fifteen, eighteen, a full score*

*I guess of sailors and petty officers, pistols in belt, hand grenades heaped between them and I daresay at the last moment with knives between their teeth.*

*They drew alongside the schooner – the French island trading schooner* Lutece *out of Papeete – and as the captain hailed them and tried to make out if they were marooned from the blackened hull of the three master whose hulk and stumps of masts he had seen not far from the channel entrance, the motorboat heeled and griped a bit while the frightened Kanakas on the* Lutece *scrambled to the gaffs or climbed out on the bowsprit or even tried to hide under the cut water. A moment later while the* Lutece*'s skipper was spluttering 'who and what?' the Germans were over the side, scrambling from one end to the other with enough left in the launch to keep the machine gun swung round at its ugliest and Kling was informing the master that he had been captured by the marooned crew of the sea raider* Seeadler.

*In other days, they wouldn't have thought much of the* Lutece. *It would have been a case of 'hello you're taken, farewell' and a bomb aboard to knock the sides out of her without much ado or merrymaking over such a small prize.*

*But now the cards had been shuffled and the* Lutece, *small and dirty and insignificant as she was from the standpoint of men who had set their ambitions on the capture of the biggest vessels they could overtake, was as much to them as if she had been a north Atlantic liner.*

*A light hearted gang they were as they fell to the job of fitting up the* Lutece *for the new expedition – whether for raiding or trying to get half around the world and so home again. Certain it was, the* Lutece *was more comfortable for such a voyage than the motorboat and no less certain that there'd be fewer – if any – Germans to leave behind.*

*A big crew it was for so small a craft – three score and more men packed into a schooner that was comfortably filled by less than a fourth of that number. She was, in fact, overcrowded. The dunnage alone of the sixty odd Germans made a pile to look at, and when you add in the provisions – all they could scrape together, with no great thought of what would happen to us – and water and ammunition and the machine gun, there was little enough on board to make the schooner look like an excursion boat.*

*Kling, Pries, and even the doctor – drunk again – had their hands full. All the dynamite bombs were stowed in the hold and the motorboat was slung on deck.*

*And then, without much ado or any elaborate leave takings, it was up anchor and away and we were left on the island, the 29 of us from the prizes, the four concessionaire Kanakas and the twelve from the* Lutece*, the two officers from the schooner plus the Hollander who had been valet and launderer to the Germans ever since, out of Rio, he had made that nasty remark about the German paper money in which he was now, like the Americans, who worked for the pay of the raider, paid off in full.*[6]

Kling and his crew had made it off the island in a far more satisfactory manner than their superiors who, on that selfsame day, were making the long and agonising trip from Aitutaki to Katafanga. Yet their path was far from clear. They were aboard an overloaded vessel and it didn't take long to discover that she leaked like a sieve. What's more, Kling had an afterguard consisting of an arrogant bully boy, who wasn't afraid to defy his superior officer, and a drunk. Just like the crew of the *Bounty* some 200 years previous, the *Lutece* was a homeless renegade roaming the Pacific

with a troublesome crew, just searching for a home. As Mopelia sank slowly below the horizon, the stump of the *Seeadler*'s foremast remained prominent, silhouetted against the bright sky. This last blackened shard of their once proud cruiser seemed to point to the heavens in a gesture of both warning and rebuke. The men turned away and looked forward towards the horizon. Their future was uncertain, but they were at least on the move. They all prayed that they might once more see the Fatherland.

As for the prisoners of war, who had been so hastily left behind on Mopelia, they did not remain there long. However, the remainder of their stay was fraught. Prior to departure, Kling had destroyed the wireless and placed Captain Southard of the *Manila* in command. The shore party was left with a damaged boat that, as Captain Smith stated rather picturesquely, 'had a bilge so stoved in that she had no more bottom than a bit of doughnut'.[7] Nevertheless, this boat was repaired, which was as well, for the camp soon became embroiled in an ugly power struggle, with Captain Smith challenging the authority of Southard, whom he evidently resented being put in charge.

In the end, Southard hurriedly put to sea after only three days' preparation, accompanied by Captain Porutu of the *Lutece* and a local Polynesian sailor. The three had a dreadful time of it and ended up spending several days lost before managing to find their way back to Mopelia. Captain Smith now took his chance and, preparing the boat far more thoroughly, headed to Pago Pago with his mate, Baer, and two crewmen from the *Manila*. After a ten-day passage, the four men arrived intact on 19 September, and help was immediately dispatched to the remainder of the castaways. Captain Smith was hailed as a hero, and his inevitably biased account of the whole debacle is a useful source for piecing together exactly what happened to the *Seeadler* and her crew on Mopelia.

You may be wondering whatever happened to our glamorous young stowaway, Gladys Taylor. Well, she seemed to have flourished throughout the adventure, and it is perhaps good to provide some balance to Smith's views of island life with Gladys's account of her time on Mopelia.

Taylor's story caused a sensation when she arrived back on the mainland, and stories of the pretty girl who had been trapped on an island with almost 100 men naturally gripped the nation – the newspapers gushed over her. Here is her personal account of the adventure, prefaced by some marvellously sensationalist reportage:

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## LEWIS COUNTY GIRL HAS AMAZING ADVENTURE; A PETER PAN HEART PROTECTS HER FROM EVIL

Youth, daring and fate. They decreed for Miss Gladys Taylor, of Mossy Rock, Lewis County, Washington, the most amazing adventure of her time. For two months she lived among marooned German sea raiders and their captive crews on a mid Pacific island – a lone Miss Robinson Crusoe, with 120 Men Fridays.

As prisoner of Count von Luckner aboard his *Seeadler*, the famous German raider, she witnessed battles that echoed the terrors of the Spanish Main. Protected by the chivalry of an American captain, she lived through combats of wits, fists and guns and primitive associations with seafaring men, to come out unscathed. She landed in San Francisco a day or so ago with 50 of the *Seeadler*'s rescued captives brought from Tahiti by the steamer *Paloona*, and will soon be in Tacoma on her way home. That her adventure did not end tragically

is due to the fact that Miss Taylor, although a woman of 23, has the heart of a Peter Pan. It began when she impulsively decided to stow away in the schooler *A. B. Johnson*, leaving Willapa Harbor, Wash, for Australia, to see the world.

**Introduced as Wife**

Discovered by Captain Peterson when too late to turn his vessel back, the girl was reprimanded and then signed on as stewardess. She'd started her great adventure, and her heart leaped with anticipation.

The thrills and escapades came thick and fast. And the hazards were grim. Captain Peterson's schooner was among the first victims of the raider *Seeadler*. Miss Taylor was the only woman – an alluring, bright eyed, red-lipped girl. To give her the protection which even a Teuton raiding party might be expected to accord, the American skipper introduced her as his wife. This alone saved the impetuous girl from a harsh fate.

**Confidence Her Shield**

For weeks life was a battle and a cruise, with von Lucknor [*sic*] adding more crews to his captive list. Miss Taylor met the incredulous and sometimes slantwise stares of rough men with the unflinching confidence that was her shield. She insisted on being on deck during the captures, risking her life on several occasions.Then followed the long days on Mophea [Mopelia] island, far down the Pacific, when the *Seeadler* was wrecked and the entire party of 120 men and one woman lived on the sandy beach awaiting rescue. Miss

Taylor, known as Captain Peterson's wife, was accorded every courtesy and many liberties by Count von Lucknor. With the captured officers, she lived in the 'American camp' in tents improvised from supplies aboard the grounded raider.

### Smile Helps

The rigid discipline of the sea, maintained by the Germans, gave the girl added protection. Her frank smile and cheery spirit won the instant friendship and admiration of every man who shared her castaway fortunes. They vied with one another to make the courageous girl comfortable, to set her at ease.

No drudgery for her. Food was provided and served by the German stewards.

Shielded from hardships like a child, hers was the existence of a princess, rather than a chore-woman.

### Treated Like Queen

'I was treated like a queen,' she said upon her arrival at San Francisco. 'Never again shall I expect to be thrown among men in any walk of life and conventional circumstances who will treat me with such unfailing courtesy and kindly consideration.' The greatest tribute she pays her comrades in misfortune lies in her simple statement – 'l was not once afraid.' Life on the desolate island was relieved of dreariness by fishing parties, hunts for turtles, coconut gathering expeditions, bathing parties, and the constant demand

upon ingenuity to bridge the gaps between bare necessities and comfort.

The Germans lived apart in one colony. The Americans, divided into groups of officers and sailors, had their own tent and palm-tree huts. Three Kanakas made up the rest of the population. Among that motley group the girl-woman alone did not constantly watch the horizon for a liberating sail. She was content living a romance that only Stevenson could have devised for his heroine. 'They all seemed just men there to me – Germans and Americans and the rest – men with big hearts and clean minds. My trust was not once abused. I lay down in my tent at night to sleep as untroubled as if I were in my bed at home in Mossy Rock, Washington. And I woke to days that seemed like glorious dreams come true. I felt like mother Eve must have in the Garden – like the only woman in the world.'

**Regrets Rescue a Little**

'The sea, the glory of a strange land, the sweet winds, starry nights around campfires, the protecting league of men, and the thrilling uncertainty of tomorrow – every real woman hankers for just that at some time in her life. I trusted to luck when I stowed away at Willapa Harbor that May day. And I trusted to luck on Mopeha island. It played me true, and I have no regrets.'

Count von Lucknor and some of his officers, restless to be about their Kaiser's business, left the island in the *Seeadler*'s launches. The Americans, including Miss Taylor,

were left to the mercy of chance. After two attempts Captain Haldor Smith and a small company succeeded in reaching Pago-Pago in an open boat and directed a rescue expedition to Mopeha. The castaways were taken to Tahiti on Oct 8, and thence to San Francisco. 'The day the rescue vessel came,' concluded Miss Taylor, 'I didn't know whether to be glad or sorry. Something finer and more wonderful than I had ever before known was drawing to a close. I almost wept when Mopeha, the Island of my adventure, faded on the horizon.'

**SHE FELT LIKE EVE BY GLADYS TAYLOR**

I know how mother Eve must have felt in the Garden. On Mopelia island, in the mid-Pacific where I spent two months as a castaway among 120 seafaring men in primitive life, it seemed to me that I was the only woman in the world. It may not have been as pleasant as Eden, but no woman of today could dream of a more glorious adventure. I fished. I made turtle sandwiches. I learned to sew by stitching crude garments. My first bathing suit was made of a bed sheet I had stolen from Count von Lucknor's locker when the *Seeadler* sank and forced us all ashore. And I learned to swim. When my shoes wore out the men made wooden clogs for me. We gathered cocoa and played cards and staged dinner parties. I kept house, cleaning the floors by spreading a fresh lot of sand, and washed and mended and darned. Such prosaic things need to be done even on the Island of adventure. I sang, and romped – and lived. Never once was I homesick. Nor did I crave the companionship

or presence of another. As long as I was the only woman, the men could not do too much for me, from the count to the humblest sailor. My only worry during the long wait for rescue was what the women would say when I got back home and the details of my strange predicament came to light. It has been my experience that a girl is safe anywhere who has for a shield her self respect. And that assurance is probably the greatest treasure I bring back with me from my island of adventure. Those marooned men on Mopeha – all of them – would have converted the most confirmed cynic. Now that it's all over, the whole experience seems to me like a lark. It was the realisation of just what I vaguely had in mind when I stowed away aboard Captain Peterson's schooner out of our Washington port. I have always wanted to be a boy and it was a boyish impulse which prompted me to stow away in the schooner *Johnson*. My only regret is the trouble I caused Captain Peterson who sheltered me with his name and treated me like his daughter. You see when I started out I hadn't counted on the Kaiser's long arm. But even so, I think I should have gone. Yes, I felt like mother Eve on the island, and when the rescue schooner bore me away I knew the regrets that the first woman must have known when she was driven from her Eden.[8]

# 14
# BABY-KILLERS IMPRISONED

On 22 May 1917, around the time that the *Seeadler* was making her way up the Pacific to a new hunting ground in the South Seas, another German raider, SMS *Wolf*, was also operating in the South Pacific (not to be confused with a vessel of the same name mentioned earlier in our story). Her actions on that May day were to have a profound effect on Felix von Luckner and the captured crew of the *Kronprinzessin Cecilie*. The *Wolf* was a vastly different raider to the *Seeadler*: she was a big, modern cargo steamer that had been built in 1913 and converted to a raider following the outbreak of war. She carried seven 5.9-inch guns and had the capability to lay minefields and fire torpedoes. She even carried a small seaplane, which the crew affectionately nicknamed 'Wolfchen' (Wolf cub). She had run the British blockade in similarly atrocious weather to the *Seeadler* and had left a trail of destruction in her wake ever since. Unlike the *Seeadler*, her prisoners were kept down below in the hold and allowed on deck only once a day for exercise and fresh air.

On 22 May she was anchored off the remote Kermadec Islands that lie to the south of New Zealand. At the time, she was carrying out repairs, but when her lookout reported a ship on the horizon, the crew

sprang into action. Wolfchen took to the sky and flew over the ship, which proved to be SS *Wairuna*, a freighter carrying cheese, milk and coal. A message was dropped on deck that ordered 'Do not use wireless. Stop engines', before Wolfchen left a more emphatic message off her bows – by dropping a bomb. The *Wairuna* was subsequently captured and scuttled, while her crew of 42 were taken prisoner. A month later, the *Wolf*, still operating off New Zealand, laid two minefields off the North Cape and Cape Farewell. That September, SS *Port Kembla* struck a mine and sank.

New Zealand is a long way from anywhere; the Western Front was, literally and figuratively, half a world away. Although New Zealand supplied more than its fair share of soldiers – volunteers to start with, and conscripts later on – it remained difficult to feel any strong connection with events in Europe. Yet, despite this, the war was to be pivotal in shaping New Zealand as a nation in its own right. The heroics of so many thousands of New Zealanders at Gallipoli and Passchendaele gave the fledgling nation a feeling of identity and, strangely, an assertion of their own independence in the service of their imperial masters. Yet, there was a dark side to this forging of a nation: another means of bringing people together was to stoke fear and loathing of Germans resident in New Zealand, who soon became used to epithets such as 'evil Hun' and 'baby-killer'. From an early stage, the media was actively encouraged to incite hatred against these 'aliens'.[1]

As in other parts of the Empire and, of course, in Britain itself, hatred became a key factor in maintaining public determination throughout the war. The enemy, shaped into a grotesque monster by the media, became more of a cartoon fiend than anything. By 1917, fed on a steady drip of propaganda from Britain, which was aided and abetted by their own

local press, most New Zealanders believed that Germans were essentially demons incarnate who would slit your throat while you lay in bed. Snooping on anyone of German lineage became something of a hobby, and many citizens of German descent were driven out of business. Shop owners found their windows were smashed on a regular basis, German biscuits were renamed 'Belgian' biscuits, and organisations such as the Women's Anti-German League were formed to keep all minds focused on how vital it was to claim victory over the hated Hun 30,000 miles away in Europe.

Despite food shortages, general inconvenience and the steady disappearance of thousands of its young men who would never come home, however, the country continued day to day in its own strange dream.

The arrival of SMS *Wolf* had shattered all that. Suddenly a New Zealand-built ship, manned by Kiwis, had vanished and her crew had disappeared without a trace. If she had been captured by a German raider, many assumed the crew would have been been murdered. A war that had seemed like little more than a distant rumour to New Zealanders was suddenly brought to their doorstep in a shocking manner. Yet, if the disappearance of the *Wairuna* had caused consternation, it was nothing compared with what happened next. The arrival of six German prisoners of war – high-ranking officers from the notorious raider SMS *Seeadler,* at that – caused both a sensation and an outrage, not least because it was widely assumed that the *Seeadler* had been responsible for destroying the *Wairuna*.

Von Luckner and his men had been moved from Suva, because New Zealand was one of the few countries in the vicinity that had decent provision for prisoners of war. There was also a real fear that while the

Germans were in Suva, the *Seeadler* – still unaccounted for – would turn up, guns blazing, and rescue them. It wasn't until October, and the arrival of Captain Smith at Pago Pago, that it became 100 per cent certain that the *Seeadler* had been destroyed. Even then, the escape of Kling and his men aboard the *Lutece* led many to believe that, somehow, von Luckner would still be rescued by his loyal crew. Nevertheless, New Zealand had two prisoner-of-war camps and it seemed like the safest place for these German renegades.

New Zealand's POW camps held German residents who were under suspicion for whatever reason, plus any sailors unfortunate enough to be in New Zealand when war broke out. In addition, there were a number of officials who had surrendered when German Samoa had been captured early on in the war.

The main aim of setting up the camps was to keep any vaguely controversial figures out of harm's way during the war. With anti-German sentiment being continuously whipped up, it seemed like a wise strategy. The problem was that these two camps instead focused public attention, providing an easy target for anti-German feelings. One frequent cause for complaint was that the prisoners were getting an easy ride during a period of shortage and hardship for the whole country. Initially, many had been in favour of imprisoning anyone of German origin, but as the war dragged on, there emerged a slight feeling that the taxpayer was subsidising a large group of people who could have been working.

The arrival of von Luckner and his men was, therefore, a blessing and a curse for the New Zealand authorities. On the one hand, it meant that, finally, they had some bona fide Germans who had definitely been involved in the war effort. On the other hand, anti-German feelings were so intense that the safety of the prisoners was under threat. The

disappearance of the *Wairuna* was still uppermost in the consciousness of the nation. At that time, the presence of SMS *Wolf* was undetected, and it was assumed that the *Seeadler* had been the only raider operating in the Pacific. Although the press initially tried to suppress the news of von Luckner's arrival in New Zealand, the word was soon out and mobs took to the street demanding that he and his men be shot as pirates and murderers. Matters were not helped by a press statement dated 10 October which confirmed not only that the *Seeadler* had been destroyed and several of her men captured, but also that the captured men admitted to destroying the *Wairuna*. The New Zealand populace was baying for blood.

Von Luckner was naturally the focal point for this hatred. The upshot was that he and Kircheiss were separated from the rest of the *Kronprinzessin*'s crew and placed in the Motuihe camp, while the other four – Leudemann, Permien, Erdemann and Krause – were interned on Somes Island off Wellington.

Of the two groups, von Luckner and Kircheiss's was definitely the more fortunate. Somes Island gained a reputation throughout the war years for being an uncomfortable and unpleasant place to stay. Motuihe, on the other hand, had been reserved for higher-ranking prisoners of war, such as the governor of Samoa, and was a far more comfortable place to stay. If you were going to be interned in a prisoner-of-war camp, then you couldn't have picked a better spot than Motuihe. Not only was the weather better than in the more southern Somes, but Motuihe was also a very beautiful place, with verdant, pine-clad uplands sloping down to sandy beaches. Prior to the war it had been a popular picnicking spot, and many grumbled that the camp was more holiday camp than prisoner-of-war camp.

Motuihe was under the supervision of Charles Harcourt Turner, who ran the camp in much the same manner as von Luckner had run the *Seeadler*. While Somes Island sometimes crossed the line between internment camp and concentration camp, Motuihe sometimes seemed to veer in the other direction. Prisoners were given a great deal of freedom and the standard of accommodation and provisioning was excellent. On one of the beaches, the interns had constructed a gazebo out of Manuka plants and on fine days they would head down there to contemplate the azure waters of the Hauraki Gulf. Between times, they were given the run of the island until late in the evening. Fishing, cooking in the prisoners' own private bakery, gardening, picking fruit and gathering oysters were all encouraged. Prisoners were even permitted to do a little shopping in Auckland from time to time, when they would be taken ashore in the island's motorboat and accompanied by a single guard. The treatment was exceptionally lenient, but, given that most of the 'prisoners' were already residents in New Zealand with little desire to escape, and, in some cases, were guilty only of German ancestry, there didn't seem a huge amount of sense in imposing draconian security regimes. Bill Wiggins, who worked as a security guard, remembered it thus: 'It was a very quiet, staid camp. The war never seemed to touch this place.'[2]

That was, until the arrival of von Luckner and Kircheiss. Suddenly, they had two highly imposing and charismatic naval officers – real Germans – whose exploits were already becoming the stuff of legend. All, including Turner, were awed by this pair, and security was stepped up with the installation of a telephone line to the mainland and a bigger, faster motorboat. Von Luckner took one look at that boat and immediately began hatching a plan. He had no intention of sitting out the rest of

the war if it was humanly possible to avoid it, and Turner's laissez-faire attitude meant that there was at least some potential for escape.

Von Luckner's greatest weapon was his charm. He was a hard man to dislike, and his captors, who had had every intention of being extra vigilant in shackling the vile Hun, soon felt their guard drop in the face of the suave, urbane and witty man. For his part, von Luckner sought to ease any fears of his escape by pretending that he was afflicted with severe rheumatism. Ever since his leg had been broken aboard the *Caesarea* many years before, he had walked with a slight limp. Now he exaggerated this to the point where he could only, apparently, hobble around with the aid of a walking stick. In the early weeks he mixed happily with the other prisoners of war, and it soon became clear that some of them had already been planning an escape – and had even gone so far as to construct a rather crude sextant. What they needed, however, was a leader and a catalyst. Von Luckner was more than happy to step up and assume that role.

# 15
# THE DOOR IS LEFT OPEN

Von Luckner was a thorough man and he also enjoyed making plans. He was extremely fortunate that a group of the prisoners on the island had already been working on a strategy for many months. This group was initially made up of five young cadets who had previously served aboard ships in the Nordeutscherlloyd line. They had been interned in the South Seas on the outbreak of war and brought to New Zealand. Being young, patriotic and doubtless homesick, they were keen to escape, and in 1916 had set about building a small boat in a cave tucked away at a secluded end of the island. Unfortunately, this boat had been destroyed by a landslip following heavy rain, but the group had retained their tools, as well as a sextant made by Walter von Zatorski from various detritus found on the island. It is testament to his extreme ingenuity that the sextant worked.

Following the destruction of their first boat the escape plan had moved along quite slowly, but three of the conspirators, von Zatorski, Karl Paulsen and Otto Freund, had all volunteered to work as engineers and deckhands on Turner's smart 35-foot launch, the *Pearl*, while they waited for the opportune moment to escape. The arrival of von Luckner and

Kircheiss provided the impetus they needed, and things suddenly began to move at pace.

Von Luckner and Kircheiss quickly formulated a plan with two key planks to it. The first was that Turner was lenient, gave all the prisoners a good deal of freedom and trusted all of them. This somewhat lax attitude gave ample scope for planning an escape. The second was the presence of those three conspirators working aboard the *Pearl*. This made capturing the boat far, far easier and it was just a case of biding their time, planning thoroughly and seizing the opportune moment. The conspirators' group was further bolstered when von Luckner's request to allow Erdemann to be transferred from Somes to Motuihe to act as his batman (personal servant) was allowed. At the same time, Karl Grun, a wireless and communications expert whom von Luckner and Kircheiss had met during their short imprisonment in Devonport, was also moved to Motuihe, and his expertise was also to prove invaluable.

Once they had made good their escape, the plan was to use the *Pearl* to capture a larger vessel and then head to the South Seas. Where they would go was just a vague outline at that point, but there was talk of recapturing Samoa for Germany, although this seemed a long shot. More likely, they hoped to seize a boat that was sufficiently large and seaworthy to get them back home to Germany. Von Luckner may also have harboured hopes of a rendezvous with SMS *Wolf*, which was rumoured to be at large in the area. That plan would have required a wireless and, remarkably, Grun had built one while on the island. This showed remarkable skill, outdone only by von Zatorski's building of a sextant.

Another loophole in the already lax rules and regulations at Motuihe had allowed Grun to assemble parts for his remarkable project. If

prisoners wanted something from Auckland, they were required only to fill out a chit. This was checked by Turner, signed, and, in time, the item was brought to the island. The problem was that prisoners were getting around this system: they waited until Turner had signed off on the order and then simply added in new items that might otherwise have been questioned. It was altogether too easy.

The group did face challenges, however: the camp had a number of informants within it, so secrecy was required. Also, while the motorboat was a decent size and reasonably seaworthy, she was not made for crossing oceans, and had fuel for a trip of only a day or so. In addition, Turner saw to it that the spark plugs were removed each evening, thereby disabling the motor. If the prisoners were to have any realistic chance of escape, they were going to need those spark plugs in place, extra fuel supplies, and the ability to rig a mast and sail as a backup. The mast and sail were particularly tricky items to manufacture, and to do this in secret would be almost impossible. Initially, von Luckner was flummoxed, but inspiration came in seasonal form. By now it was November, and von Luckner asked Turner if it would be permitted for him to put on a Christmas play in order to keep up morale. Turner was initially cautious, fearing – rightly, as it turned out – that von Luckner might be planning to escape.

Von Luckner later recalled that Turner had said, 'For god's sake count, you're not planning on running away are you? If you run away, I lose my job.'[1] It was another appeal to von Luckner's good nature, and the count assured his captor that he had nothing of the sort on his mind. Turner believed him, although he had every reason to be suspicious, for, on 29 November, he received the following anonymous note written roughly in rather sinister red ink: 'loock your Launch, there is Proviant Benzin and

sail for runaway today don't mention this'.[2] Despite the rather garbled message, it was clear that escape was planned – the Benzin being a reference to fuel.

A quick investigation of the prisoners' premises enabled Turner to trace the red ink to the canteen; he came to the conclusion that a man named Paulsen, who worked there, had written it. Despite this clear warning, nothing was done to prevent an escape, although Turner later stated he had been more assiduous in making sure the spark plugs were removed.

Naturally, a war theme was chosen for the play and a re-enactment of the battle of Jutland was agreed upon. The upshot of this was that von Luckner and his band of escapees had a first-class pretext for manufacturing all sorts of 'props' that just might also be useful in the event of a breakout. Turner, after his initial reservations, was very impressed with the diligence of von Luckner and the group of men he had selected to produce the play. They worked tirelessly day after day to build a really convincing set, with highly realistic weapons to match. Some of his officers were less convinced, however, and grew positively alarmed when they caught one of the men making a pistol holster – all for the play, they were informed. Turner was obviously of a credulous nature, for when one of his staff pointed out that the amateur dramatics society seemed to be making a sail, he was willing to swallow the explanation that it was a curtain for the stage, while the German flag that had been lovingly sewn together – and the fake machine gun – were evidently just very convincing props.

He was also mildly confused when he noted that the watertight compartments in his smart motor launch had been nailed shut, but was reassured by the explanation that this had been done to stop them

rattling. Then there had been the unpleasant outbreak of avian flu that had wiped out 40 fowls over the space of a month. Thankfully, the prisoners had diligently disposed of the birds before the officers had even had a chance to inspect them. It was indicative of a new and wholly refreshing attitude among many of the younger prisoners, one which seemed to have been inspired by this jolly Christmas performance. All in all, Turner was well satisfied with the extreme alertness and newfound enthusiasm among his prisoners as the festive season approached. Life was extremely satisfactory.

Turner was in buoyant mood as he headed back to Motuihe on the afternoon of 13 December after a shopping trip to Auckland. It was the middle of summer and the Hauraki Gulf looked its best: bright blue waters whipped up and glowing with feathery whitecaps, and adorned with great verdant jewels of islands. As the *Pearl* sped back to Motuihe, it was hard not to feel deeply fortunate; somewhere out there military men were crouching in mud and trenches, dodging bullets and awaiting death – but not here. All Turner had to worry about was a pleasant meal that night, and the hope that the Christmas entertainments would be as good as they promised to be.

Presently the *Pearl* arrived off Motuihe and Turner, his daughter and Wainwright, a guard at the camp, were dropped ashore at the jetty. The prisoners Freund and Paulsen, who were aboard, then puttered back out to a nearby mooring buoy, where the *Pearl* was secured for the night. The pair would row in to shore using the island's only dinghy. Wainwright was meant to wait until all was secure, but one of the conspirators, Schmidt, was waiting with a cart and offered him a lift up the hill. He looked to Turner for permission and his commander gave him a good-humoured nod. He himself preferred to stroll up to roll call with his

daughter beside him. At the top of the hill Turner generally paused and waited to ensure that the *Pearl* was secured and that the prisoners were back ashore. Yet, for some reason, that night he didn't. Perhaps it was because he was running late for roll call; perhaps his daughter hurried him along. Whatever the reason, this moment of negligence would cost him dear. He turned his back on the sea and continued his way up the hill.

Roll call was a subdued affair as no less than 11 prisoners had obtained permission to be absent. This was not exceptional and Turner thought no more about it. Down on the quayside, however, things were happening with frantic rapidity. Freund and Paulsen had restarted the *Pearl*'s engine and brought it back alongside the jetty, where the rest of the conspirators had gathered. One of the party, Ernst Klohn, was laying into the dinghy with an axe to ensure no one could follow them, while the rest of the escape party boarded hastily, keen to get off. Yet one man was missing, Grun, who had been busy disabling the telephone line to the mainland. He arrived after a prodigious sprint – hot, sweaty and excited. The *Pearl* was cast off, motoring out of the Hauraki Gulf and towards the distant horizon at her maximum speed of about seven knots. Escape, long dreamt of, looked like it was about to become a reality, but they had some distance to go before they could be confident that they were truly free.

Back on shore, the absence of the conspirators attracted little attention. At 7.10pm, however, Turner got a call on the internal line from the camp sergeant major. He had spotted the camp dinghy drifting, half sunk, along the coast. He had also noted that the *Pearl* was gone. He had put two and two together and explained to Turner that Paulsen, Freund and von Zatorski must have taken the *Pearl* out to retrieve the dinghy. Turner, as we have seen, was a man with a gullible nature, yet

even he must have felt uneasy. After a long wait and no sign of the *Pearl*, he asked the sergeant major to check on the whereabouts of von Luckner and Kircheiss. They were nowhere to be seen. With a despairing certainty in the pit of his stomach, Turner picked up the phone and called headquarters back in Auckland. The line was dead. At that moment, Turner knew with horrible conviction that his career was over. There would be no Christmas entertainment – the Christmas entertainment for most New Zealanders that year would be him: the press, the public – even his own colleagues – would destroy him.

Here's how the *New Zealand Truth* explained in rather sardonic terms how the plot unfolded:

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## ESCAPED HUN PRISONERS
## A DASH FOR LIBERTY FROM MOTUIHI ISLAND

**Leave In a Launch which is Nice and Handy**

**A Court of Inquiry Set Up**

As is well-known, Motuihi [*sic*] Island in the Hauraki Gulf has been used since the outbreak of war as the dumping ground for German prisoners, or rather some of them, and up to a couple of months ago, the prisoners were regarded as a very ordinary lot and of the harmless sort. But only a few weeks ago something in the nature of tone was given to the island by the placing thereon of

**COUNT VON LUCKNER,**

who had been commander of the German raider *Seeadler*, which ship it was reported had caught fire, forcing the

crew to take to the boats, which fact led to the capture of the Count and other members of the *Seeadler*'s crew in the Pacific when a launch paid a mysterious visit to the Cook group. Of the captured occupants of the launch Count von Luckner, commander of the *Seeadler*, Lieutenant Kircheiss and a seaman named Erdmann were afterwards placed on Motuihi Island and there they remained till about half past six on Thursday evening of last week when with eight other prisoners they effected their escape. The escape was effected very simply. A roll call is made each evening at 6 pm and it is said that at the roll call on Thursday all the inmates were accounted for. A few minutes later two of the prisoners proceeded to get a dinghy which was supposed to be drifting. Having secured the dinghy it is believed they pulled to where the 35ft launch *Pearl*, used by the Camp Commandant, was, and having secured the launch, then made for another point, picking up nine other prisoners, who, it had been arranged, were in waiting. The men then made off. It would be about half-past six when the discovery was made that the prisoners had disappeared, but as the launch and dinghy were the only boats that had been at the island, it was impossible to set off in pursuit. A direct telephone being established between Motuihi and Auckland, the military authorities in Auckland were at once 'phoned, but being

**UNABLE TO GET AN ANSWER,**

it was evident that there had been some interference with the wire. The task of finding at night where the line had

been tampered with was not easy, but a long and careful search along the whole length of the line on the island revealed that the wire had been what is called 'earthed,' that is, the main wire had been tapped by a contact wire leading down into the earth, thus breaking the circuit. This was evidence that the escape was planned beforehand. The fault in the wire was remedied as quickly as possible, but it was not until close upon midnight that those on the island could get into touch with Auckland. As it was the custom to get a report from Motuihi at midnight, there was nothing to arouse the suspicions of the military authorities in the city. However, so soon as word of the escape came to hand, Major Price immediately organised a search party, and less than a couple of hours after the news had been received certain boats left in search of the escapees. […]

The position in a nutshell was then that by taking the launch and dinghy, the only boats available at the island, the Germans killed two birds with one stone, in that they made their escape, and at the same time interned the Camp Commandant, Lieut.-Colonel Turner, and his staff. The first report gave the number who had escaped at ten, but subsequently it was known that the number was eleven, and the names and descriptions are:

Lieut.-Commander Count Felix von Luckner; age 34, height 5ft.10in, clean shaven, walks stiffly as the result of a broken thigh at one period, certain body scars the result of wounds, speaks broken English.

Second-Lieut. Carl Theodore Frederick Kirscheiss, was second in command of the German raider *Seeadler*; height 5ft. 7in, has a scar on right wrist, speaks excellent English.

Hermann Erdmann, seaman, aged 30, height 5ft. 5in., fair complexion, fair hair, speaks good English.

Albert von Egidy, plantation owner at Samoa, height 6ft. 9in., wears a beard and moustache, and stoops a little.

Karl Grun, wireless operator, dark complexion, clean shaven, tall and slight.

Otto Freund, wireless engineer, fair complexion and hair, blue eyes, stout build, height about 6ft. 6in., understands English very little.

Walter von Zatorski, naval cadet, age 23, tall, with blue eyes.

Walter Schmidt, naval cadet, age 23, hair black, eyes brown, height 5ft. 10in.

Fritz Mellert, naval cadet, age 23, well built, brown hair, blue eyes, clean shaven.

Albert Paulsen, naval cadet, age 24, light brown hair, blue eyes, clean shaven, speaks English well; might easily pass for an Englishman.

Ernst Klohn, naval cadet, age 23, dark brown hair, brown eyes, clean shaven, tall, speaks very little English.

Following events in their sequence, the next official announcement made was that Lieutenant-Colonel Harcourt Turner, the commandant at Motuihi Island, was suspended from duty, and a Court of Inquiry, which seems distinct from a court-martial, had been created.[3]

Von Luckner had been able to depart with ample supplies. The 40 chickens that had supposedly died of avian flu had been cooked up, preserved and tinned. In addition, the crew had busied themselves pickling and preserving eggs. The mast and sail had been manufactured on site, along with handmade grenades of jam jars and fuel. In addition, there was the sextant and wireless, and von Luckner claimed that the conspirators had even been able to steal two rifles with a supply of bullets, as well as 11 NZ Army uniforms.

You may be wondering how the men had managed to load all this paraphernalia aboard the *Pearl*, which had generally been anchored off the beach and reached by means of a small launch. Here, another ruse had been employed. A short time prior to the escape, Turner had been informed by Paulsen and his crew that the boat's propeller shaft was leaking. This had concerned Turner, who had ordered the boat hauled ashore so it could be inspected. While the repair was being carried out, he had ordered the engineer to get a couple of men to help him repaint the boat and scrub down the bottom. This had given the men more than ample time and opportunity to conceal supplies and weaponry in the watertight compartments, which had then been nailed shut. An area of the *Pearl* that had been designed to accommodate an extra fuel tank had been filled with water containers.

Von Luckner himself had been amazed, and reflected on it later: 'It seemed almost inconceivable how the distrust of the New Zealanders was eclipsed. They had guarded us as a rarity and treated us in a manner which is rarely experienced by war prisoners. They trusted me with the most incredible pranks. We were, so to speak, one of their greatest celebrities: as a man who had begun his entire seamanship in Australia, I was now the object of the Australian triumph, and the newspapers spoke conspicuously

of "world-historical" events in the South Seas. The appearance of the *Seeadler* crew was continually feared, and the area around Motuihe was looking for a dozen motorboats. In spite of this, we were now able to prepare a whole new chapter for the war history of that country.'[4]

The crew of the *Pearl* were not getting carried away, however, as they motored out of the Hauraki Gulf. They were aware that their chances of escaping remained moderate at best. The decision was taken to aim for the Mercury Islands, just off the tip of the Coromandel Peninsula, about 80 miles away. The breeze, which had been building all afternoon, was now approaching a gale, and with evening drawing in, the crew of the *Pearl* knew it was going to be a tough night, full of uncertainty. None was familiar with the Hauraki Gulf, and every mile they moved away from shore brought bigger, wilder seas. They were not clear of danger yet.

Meanwhile, back in Auckland, the city was awakening to its first major drama of the war. For all Turner's rather lax approach to security on the island, he had been as proactive as possible in the wake of the escape. With the telephone line severed, he lit a huge bonfire in the hope that this would attract attention. No one came. As soon as the line was repaired, Turner immediately called his superiors in Auckland and explained in clipped terms what had happened. A search was immediately organised but nothing was found.

The following day the escape became public knowledge, and all hell broke loose. Everyone wanted a piece of the action and hundreds of Kiwis set about hunting down the escapees in an armada of vessels. Pleasure yachts and fishing boats – even rowing boats – were out on the water searching for the notorious count and his crew. There was even a report of one overly diligent huntsman shooting at another motorboat under the misapprehension that she was the *Pearl*.

No one could quite believe what had happened and it was a huge embarrassment. As Prime Minister William Massey said at the time – with an admirable lack of perspective: 'it was the most regrettable thing that has happened since the war began'.[5] Although most of the soldiers on the Western Front, not to mention Gallipoli and Passchendaele, would likely have disagreed with this view, it showed how deeply people had been wounded by this awful lapse. Yet a full day of searching revealed not one sniff of von Luckner and his crew. He seemed to have vanished off the face of the earth and rumours began to circulate that the boat had been lost. The weather had certainly been sufficiently wild to justify this view, and most of the amateur Hun hunters turned for home that evening with a feeling of relief.

But the *Pearl* had not foundered. Although she had endured an uncomfortable stormy night, she had survived. Dawn found her butting into the waves off Cape Colville, and from there it was just a short hop to the Mercury Islands. These were uninhabited, but offered good shelter and an excellent place to hide from the authorities, while also allowing the escapees to keep a sharp lookout for any potential vessels to commandeer.

The men waited here for two days, during which time they had a moment of real panic: the big government steamship *Lady Roberts* was seen approaching and all feared the game was up. In a mad scramble, the *Pearl* was shoved off and Paulsen and von Zatorski, who were on lookout at the time, had to swim out to get on board as she backed off frantically. Yet it turned out to be a false alarm and the *Lady Roberts* cruised on, blissfully unaware that the most wanted men in New Zealand were just a couple of miles off her bow.

All the escapees could do was wait and hope for a boat suitable for capture to come along. It was the middle of summer, so there was no hardship in camping out, but supplies were already dwindling. Dawn on 16 December brought them the sight that they had been longing for. Two schooners – lumber scows – shaping a course that would take them close to Mercury Island.

Scows were modest-sized vessels generally employed in the coastal trade, and very popular in New Zealand up until World War II. They were flat-bottomed, shallow-draft, snub-nosed sailing boats, which were not particularly elegant but very strong. Their design allowed them to access shallow creeks, where they could be loaded up straight from the beach before floating off with the tide. They were used to move all manner of goods along the coast, but specialised in lumber, transporting great piles of logs that were sometimes stacked up to 15 feet high on their decks. Most were not really intended for anything other than coastal trading, but they were inordinately strong and seaworthy.

The boats in question proved to be the *Rangi* and the *Moa*, and both were approaching Mercury Island loaded down to their gunwales with Kauri timber. In the freshening south-west breeze, their blunt bows nuzzled and butted into the chop in a great welter of spray. They were moving at a decent pace, but von Luckner, eyeing them intently through his stolen binoculars, felt that the *Pearl* should be able to catch them. It was time for action.

Captain Francis of the *Rangi* had been watching the *Moa* very intently since first light on 16 December. His vessel had left Mayor Island in the Bay of Plenty three days previously, loaded with gravel. The life of a scow sailor was a tough, exacting one, but it was not without its rewards, and

a languid summer passage spent watching the coast slip by was a great way to unwind between the laborious work of loading and unloading a heavy cargo.

The monotony of the passage was interrupted during the early hours of the 16th by the report of lights coming up astern. Judging from the speed at which they approached, they could only belong to another sailing vessel, and all eyes focused upon her with interest. First light at dawn unveiled the mystery vessel: the *Moa*, loaded with lumber and headed for Auckland.

Now, all good scow sailors were not only excellent seamen, but also natural competitors. The sight of the *Moa* some five miles astern naturally roused the competitive side in all aboard the *Rangi*. The *Moa* was owned by the same company as the *Rangi* and was slightly larger, so the likelihood was that she would beat them into Auckland. Pride was at stake, and Captain Francis pushed his boat with a little extra diligence that fine morning, and his schooner responded.

The wind was south-westerly, which meant a beam reach all the way. It was a fine point of sail, and as dawn freshened the breeze, the *Rangi* stirred to her task. All aboard grinned as the heavily laden schooner gained pace, water chuckling beneath her forefoot, sails thrumming. By 7.30am, it was evident that the *Moa* was slowly gaining and was about four miles behind them. At the current rate, it would take hours for her to catch them and all settled down to a day of racing in company.

It was at that point that something entirely out of the ordinary occurred: as Captain Francis peered through his binoculars, he perceived the *Moa* luff up into the breeze and heave-to, her way coming off her until she was almost at a standstill. Then he saw the reason for the delay: a small launch was approaching. The *Moa* was now receding rapidly, but

he continued to peer at her through his glasses. It was clear that the launch had come alongside the *Moa* and men were climbing aboard. Who they were, he could not make out from this distance, but shortly afterwards, the launch was taken in tow and he saw the *Moa* square away, now aiming south-east, as if she was heading to the Aldermen Islands.

Captain Francis scratched his head. He was genuinely bewildered. He knew that no vessel engaged in the lumber trade would behave in such a manner. The *Moa*, quite visibly fully loaded with a huge deck cargo, had definitely been headed for Auckland and it made absolutely no sense for her to turn towards the Aldermen Islands. He paced the deck in consternation: since both vessels were owned by the same company, he felt some responsibility for the *Moa*. Yet there was no sense in turning tail and following, for the *Moa* was generally acknowledged to be the faster boat. He sailed on, but shaped a course for Port Charles on the tip of the Coromandel Peninsula. It meant sailing a couple of hours out of his way, but Captain Francis felt it was worth the effort to report the strange goings-on aboard the *Moa*. It was 2pm when he anchored in Port Charles and rowed ashore to report the incident to the postmaster there.

Captain Francis got more than he bargained for. He had departed Mayor Island blissfully ignorant of events in the world outside, but the postmaster set him right on that score. Soon Port Charles was alive with the news that the *Rangi* had seen the dreaded 'Sea Devil' – as von Luckner was nicknamed in New Zealand – embarking on another raiding trip. Immediately, HMCS *Iris*, already cruising the area in search of the Germans, was informed and she made for Port Charles to intercept the *Rangi*, which she did at 4.15pm. Captain Francis shared all he knew of the escapees' actions and probable heading, and with a clang of her

telegraph, the *Iris* roared off, heading north-east towards Cuvier Island. The escapees had a nine-hour start, but the net was tightening around them as the *Moa* sailed slowly towards her hoped-for freedom.

The hunt was on, but the odds of finding the *Moa* were not overwhelmingly high, as the *Bruce Herald* pointed out, stating, 'It is confidently anticipated by a number of people that if the Germans did board the *Moa* there should now be no difficulty in effecting her recapture, but as against that it has to be borne in mind that not very long ago a vessel that was practically a derelict, and whose general position was supposed to have been known, drifted about for over 40 days before she was finally picked up.'[6]

# 16
# THE GREAT ESCAPE

A lumber scow was not the ideal means of escape. Although incredibly tough, they were not built for speed or for ocean passages: with their shallow, flat bottoms they were prone to slamming uncomfortably in heavy seas. Nevertheless, if you were going to capture a lumber scow in which to escape, you would probably have chosen the *Moa*. At 94 feet long, she was one of the biggest scows engaged in the Tauranga trade, and had been thoroughly overhauled less than six months beforehand. Despite her somewhat unwieldy shape, she was capable of a good ten knots in a fair breeze, and there were plenty of far less seaworthy vessels plying the South Seas at the time.

Her capture had been simple enough, although events must have had an odd, dreamlike quality for the *Moa*'s crew. The Germans had approached flying the New Zealand flag, decked out in their stolen New Zealand army uniforms. The *Moa* had obligingly hove-to and von Luckner had boarded wielding Turner's military sword. Flanked by two men brandishing homemade 'bombs', he had informed the scow's crew that they were prisoners of Kaiser Wilhelm.

The *Moa*'s captain, William Bourke, was an ex-naval man, yet he couldn't have been even vaguely prepared for this scenario. Bourke had

heard nothing of the breakout on Motuihe, and Kaiser Wilhelm must have seemed like something of a distant figure as the *Moa* trundled across the Bay of Plenty. Bourke had four men and a boy on board with him, none of them armed with anything but their fists, and he immediately realised that he was beaten. He surrendered amid a good deal of foul language, stating that it was 'damned bad luck to be captured in this fashion'.[1] He had a point. The odds on a vessel being captured by the Germans off the Coromandel Peninsula were long.

Von Luckner gave a short speech in which he told his captives that they were now prisoners of war, that they must help work the ship, and that their treatment would depend entirely on their conduct. At this point, von Egidy, the Samoan plantation owner who had escaped with them, suggested that the captives be thrown overboard. However, this proposal was immediately rejected by von Luckner. Any concerns about the fabled Hun barbarity were quickly dismissed when von Luckner approached Captain Bourke and slapped him on the back, commiserating with him for his ill fortune. In the meantime, von Luckner's crew were doing their best to cheer up Joseph Gregan, a lad of 11 who had been sent on the trip for health reasons and who was now, quite naturally, very scared. The Germans eventually won him over by plying him with chocolate and sweets, which they still had from their time on Motuihe. The *Pearl* was attached to the stern by means of a long towline, and the *Moa* filled away on her new course bound south-eastward.

As New Zealand sank slowly below the horizon, von Luckner and Kircheiss began to assess their options. It was clear that the *Moa* was seaworthy enough to undertake a long passage, even if she wasn't the ideal boat for the job. She also had about 1,000 gallons of water aboard. Yet there was a stumbling block: the *Moa* was provisioned for a passage from Tauranga to Auckland –

only a short hop of no more than two weeks – so food supplies were naturally modest. There were now 16 mouths to feed, and even with the strictest rationing, there was no way they could make it back to the South Seas.

There was hope, however. The Kermadec Islands lay some 600 miles to the south-east, about halfway between New Zealand and Tonga. Although the islands were deserted, it was well known that the New Zealand government kept a cache of supplies ashore, just in case anyone was wrecked there. Bolstered by these extra supplies, the *Moa* could easily win through to the South Seas and freedom.

Once clear of land, the helm was rattled down and a course was set for the Kermadecs. At 7pm that evening, the escapees passed Cuvier Island and were sighted by another ship, which, when she arrived in port, reported seeing a vessel that matched the description of the *Moa*.[2]

As the *Moa* edged closer to freedom, her crew were not idle. The schooner was heavily laden with a full cargo of timber and was not in the right sort of trim for handling big seas. Von Luckner therefore ordered half of the cargo to be thrown overboard. In the meantime, he and Kircheiss moved aft into the officers' quarter and the crew settled in to life in the focsle. The men were split into two watches and the prisoners helped out and also dined with their captors. Captain Bourke later recalled that the Germans maintained very stiff discipline and that von Luckner was saluted when he came on deck in the morning. In common with most who encountered von Luckner, he also warmed to his captor, later referring to him as 'a good sport'. He even spoke to von Luckner about the latter's escape, and von Luckner explained with admirable logic, 'Well, if you supply me with a cart and leave the door wide open, what would you do?'[3]

The first night of their escape was a fraught one. The weather once again turned wild and this was to prove fatal to the *Pearl*, which, bobbing

about on the end of a long towline, was swamped by the big seas and had to be abandoned. This was a blow to the fugitives, who realised that they might have needed the *Pearl* again at some point, but it did mean that the *Moa* made better speed and sailed with a more comfortable motion.

On 21 December, the Kermadecs were sighted, two jagged, low volcanic stumps in the middle of a lonely ocean. This was their last hurdle before they were free to disappear into the vastness of the South Pacific. They made for Curtis Island, where the stores were reputed to be kept, but were initially scared off on sighting smoke issuing from the island. They then realised that the whole chain of islands was volcanic and someone aboard correctly surmised that this was the cause of the smoke.

They approached the lonely outpost. Battered relentlessly by the ocean, and with only Cheesman Island to the north-east for company, it sat puffing meditatively away as it contemplated eternity. To the Germans, this wind-battered spot must have looked bleak, but it offered them the final chance of freedom and they anchored off MacDonald Cove to get supplies. It was at this point that the *Pearl* would have proved extremely useful, as she would have speeded up the operation considerably. As it was, Kircheiss and a raiding crew rowed ashore in *Moa*'s small dinghy. They soon found the ramshackle little hut and ransacked it hurriedly before making off as quickly as they could – although not before leaving a small note of apology for their bad manners.

Kircheiss was used to feeling that he was always on the edge of capture; aside from the short break on Motuihe, he had felt that nagging fear almost from the moment *Seeadler* had left the German coast – nearly a year previously to the day. He felt it again now as they hurried down to the water's edge. There were too many supplies for a single load, so they

had to return to shore, and as they loaded the second batch, Kircheiss saw something that made his heart sink into his boots. There on the horizon was a telltale wisp of smoke. A steamer approaching!

Immediately all hands set to work with a will to get the *Moa* away from land as quickly as possible. The Kermadecs were not on any normal trading route, so the chances of this being a vessel on some innocent errand were slim. All sail was set in order to get the *Moa* on her way, yet the breeze was light. The fastest sailing ship in the world would not have been a match for a steamship in these conditions, and the *Moa* made a painful five knots in the fickle wind. All too rapidly the steamer approached, and the closer she came, the more obvious it was that she was definitely not a trading vessel. With a horrible certainty and prickling sense of dread, they perceived that this was an armed ship bearing down on them with great purpose: that purpose was to put them back behind bars.

They were right: it was the *Iris*, and her captain had correctly deduced that the Curtis Island store would be the logical stop-off for a ship short on supplies and heading for the South Seas. By pure luck, she had arrived at the island at roughly the same time as the *Moa*. The chances of this occurring had been slim, but it meant that her search for a needle in a haystack was over.

Von Luckner knew the game was up, but opted to run until the very end. With his usual love of drama, he also ordered the German ensign to be flown. As the *Iris* approached, a signal was run up ordering the *Moa* to stop. This was ignored. Then, in a move that von Luckner knew very well from his months aboard the *Seeadler*, a shot was fired across *Moa*'s bow. It was time to face reality. There would be no last death-or-glory fight; the *Moa* simply hove-to.

From the bridge of the *Iris* came the booming hail of 'Where from?' to which von Luckner replied matter-of-factly, with just a hint of humour, 'Auckland.' 'Are there any Germans on board?' came the next hail. 'Yes,' came the resigned reply. The game was up. As he stepped down into the *Moa*'s launch, he gave Captain Bourke a wry grin and, recalling their first encounter, said, 'Hard luck, eh?' and with that, he disappeared over the side to face the music.[4]

# 17
# A FLOATING COFFIN

While von Luckner's good fortune seemed to have run out, Lieutenant Kling was also battling the slings and arrows. He had departed Mopelia aboard the schooner *Lutece* on 5 September, hoping to pull off an escape in the mould of the crew of the *Emden*. He and the remainder of *Seeadler*'s crew had remained at large for many months after their commander's capture, and in New Zealand they had gained almost mythical status; many were waiting for the *Seeadler* to appear over the horizon, guns blazing, to liberate von Luckner. Yet the *Seeadler* was long gone and the *Lutece* was proving a highly unsatisfactory replacement.

Things had initially seemed promising; the *Lutece* was an inter-island trader – a sort of mobile shop of the oceans – and, as such, she was exceptionally well stocked with supplies. Kling had held high hopes and renamed the schooner *Fortuna* – the latest addition to the Kaiser's Imperial Navy. Yet a few days of sailing soon revealed that the Kaiser had got a pretty raw deal, for the *Fortuna* possessed a plethora of very serious defects. With *Seeadler*'s still generous complement of 58, the little schooner was dreadfully overcrowded for starters, and it was soon evident to all that the schooner was also overrun with rats, as well as cockroaches and scorpions, which roamed about below decks in abundance. None of

this was conducive to a comfortable night's sleep, and it was merely the start of their problems.

An inspection of the rig revealed that there were serious issues with rot in the masts, which meant that Kling was unable to push the schooner hard with any confidence. This issue became immaterial, however, because as soon as the hull of the *Fortuna* was put under any strain, she leaked like a sieve and required near constant pumping to keep her afloat. Things reached a head on 22 September, when the crew pumped solidly all day, only to find that the leak was gaining on them. To stay on top of things they had to use buckets as well.

Kling began to refer to the *Fortuna* as a 'floating coffin' in his diary. This was not far from the truth and is corroborated by interviews with the original owners of the schooner. They were interviewed on their rescue from Mopelia and described her in the following terms: 'The *Lutece* was painted white, and is a little schooner not more than 120 tons burthen. The vessel is leaking badly. Unless the raider's crew succeeds in trapping a bigger vessel, it is considered certain that she will finally make for Java, a Dutch possession, where the men will be interned.'[1]

Their position was indeed perilous, as they were extremely isolated. Upon departing Mopelia, Kling had shaped a course west, but had then doubled back east when out of sight in order to throw anyone off the scent. He had evidently succeeded in this, as most expected him to head for Java. He reckoned he had two clear weeks before the Americans on Mopelia could make it to another island and raise the alarm, and he wanted to get as far away as possible in that time. After some debate, he opted to shape a course eastward towards Chile, which was a neutral country. What plans he had from there are unclear. It is possible that if the *Fortuna* had been a seaworthy boat, they might have carried on to Cape Horn, and from there,

homeward to Germany. Yet that plan was patently impossible now, and even reaching Chile looked like a long shot. Kling had sailed the *Fortuna* into one of the emptiest, loneliest stretches of ocean in the world. Unlike the South Seas, which were dotted with islands over a stretch of thousands of miles, this south-eastern corner of the Pacific had only solitary islands like Pitcairn and Easter Island to occasionally break the lonely monotony.

Fletcher Christian and the crew aboard the *Bounty* had headed out into this huge expanse of ocean following their mutiny in 1789, and it had nearly proved their undoing – that is, until they located Pitcairn, which had offered them sanctuary and salvation of sorts. Now Kling and his crew followed in their weary tracks in a boat that they were all certain would not survive any serious heavy weather. They decided to shape a course for Easter Island, which was a dependency of Chile, and therefore neutral. Kling felt that if they could get the *Fortuna* ashore, inspect the hull and effect some repairs, there might be some hope of them carrying on to Chile. It was to be a long voyage – 28 days in all – with sailors pumping the wretched *Fortuna* around the clock, and all aboard hoping against hope that the weather would remain fair and that the masts did not end up going over the side. Meanwhile, the relationship between Kling and Pries – strained at the best of times – became increasingly fractious.

After the horribly fraught night when it had looked as if the leak might actually overwhelm them, the crew were able to keep on top of things until Easter Island finally hove into view on 3 October. This surreal and remote outpost – guarded as it was by those strange giant heads – was a peculiar, burned-out, bleak and beautiful spot. To the exhausted sailors of the *Fortuna* it must have looked like paradise itself. Given the state of the *Fortuna*, they were lucky they had made it at all, but then again, they had been supremely unfortunate in procuring such

an unseaworthy vessel in the first place. They anchored off La Perouse Bay, a small indent in the island's rugged coastline, and stepped ashore with a feeling of immense relief.

They were treated with cautious courtesy by the officials of the island, who were unsure of what to expect from a group of heavily armed Germans in a leaky schooner. The decision was taken to let them stay, however, and the crew were given permission to carry out repairs on the *Fortuna*, which was shifted to an anchorage in Cooks Bay. Unfortunately, on 5 October, she struck an uncharted rock in the bay and began to take on even more water. Kling promptly had everything salvageable removed from the schooner, and the next day she was hauled ashore to have her hull inspected; it proved riddled with rot and badly eaten through by Teredo worms. They decided that the schooner was beyond repair, and all must have gladly washed their hands of the wretched boat, which was slowly pounded to pieces in the surf.

The crew was back to square one – heavily armed, but with only a miserable motor launch for raiding purposes. Chile's government representative on Easter Island was kind enough to accommodate the men, and in the meantime, Kling set his mind to raiding again. Some six weeks later, on 24 November, an opportunity presented itself: a schooner was sighted on the horizon. Kling knew he had to act quickly if he was to capture it before it entered Chilean waters; the officials on the island had warned him off taking such action. Nevertheless, with the schooner many miles distant, there was a chance of completing their heroic escape and Kling began to prepare his men to head off.

However, it was not to be. The ever-troublesome Pries openly defied Kling and refused to cooperate. A delay ensued and the opportunity was missed. Pries later wrote that he 'would not board a captured ship and

did not recognise Kling as acting commander'.[2] Kling, in return, wrote in the *Seeadler*'s official war diary that he 'respectfully requested court martial of Sub-Lieutenant Pries'.[3] The iron discipline of the German Imperial Navy was finally starting to fracture, and it must have been a blow to Kling – one of the originators and driving forces behind the *Seeadler* venture – to fail in his opportunity to go it alone. Kling was often identified as the brains behind the *Seeadler*, while von Luckner was its bombastic figurehead. Yet Kling evidently missed his charismatic leader.

The months drifted by, and it wasn't until 25 January 1918 that the Chilean schooner *Falcon* arrived at Easter Island, bound for Talcahuano on the mainland. Kling and his men arrived at Talcahuano on 2 March, and, opting to stay, agreed to be interned there for the remainder of the war, not being repatriated until 1919. It was an anticlimactic end to a glorious adventure.

# 18
# FREEDOM AND DEFEAT

Those few days on the *Moa* would be the last freedom that von Luckner and Kircheiss would enjoy for the remainder of the war. The *Iris* towed the *Moa* back to Auckland and the escapees endured three miserable weeks in Mount Eden jail. This was a source of considerable grievance to von Luckner, who asserted that, as prisoners of war, they should not have been subject to imprisonment of this nature. The fact was that the New Zealand authorities simply weren't sure what to do with this volatile prisoner and could not afford the embarrassment of another escape. The press in New Zealand had been extremely damning of the authorities, while the escapades of von Luckner – now that he was safely back under lock and key – were more likely to raise a smile rather than provoke censure.

One man who was not smiling, however, was Lieutenant Colonel Harcourt Turner, who had been unquestionably hung out to dry by his superiors. On 18 December, before von Luckner and his comrades had even been recaptured, Turner had been called up in front of a court of enquiry and spent 12 excruciating days being hauled over the coals. Turner had been brutally frank about what had happened and certainly had not spared himself. He had offered only two lines of defence: first, that he had been constantly urged by his superiors to cut his expenditures,

with the result that he had deployed a tactic of appealing to the better nature of his captives. His second argument was that his suspicions had been lulled because von Luckner and Kircheiss had given their word 'as German officers' that they would not try to escape. He reinforced this point by stating that, once he had the spark plugs from the *Pearl* safe in his quarters, he had not believed that the Germans would dream of taking them by force, as he testified: 'The idea of any of the prisoners breaking into my quarters, overpowering me, obtaining the sparking plugs and seizing the launch never entered my mind because I considered I knew the character of the prisoners … it did not enter my head that he would attempt such action. He is not the class of man to do such a thing in my opinion.'[1]

This defence was laudable, except that von Luckner and his accomplices had not been required to use any force at all in order to seize the launch – with spark plugs in place – and the inquiry found Turner 'guilty of culpable negligence in that he made inadequate arrangements of ensuring and safeguarding the sparking plugs of his launch when the launch was not in use'.[2] Turner was relieved of his duties – much to the sorrow of his escaped captives. Walter von Zatorski later expressed his regret at the downfall of someone he considered a 'fine gentleman' and whose misfortune was 'deplored very sincerely by all of us escapees'.[3]

After three long weeks in Mount Eden prison, von Egidy was sent back to Motuihe and everyone else was sent to the rather grim camp on Somes Island, with the exception of von Luckner and Kircheiss. The two naval officers discovered there was a different treat in store for them: they were shipped to Ripapa (sometimes known as Ripa Island) in Lyttelton Harbour on the South Island. This fortified island had been used to intern military defaulters and had a certain harshness in stark contrast to

Motuihe. The officers were surrounded by barbed wire and guards, and the weather was also far colder down south than in the Hauraki Gulf. As a result, Kircheiss suffered terribly with rheumatism. It was perhaps for this reason that the New Zealand authorities relented and the pair were allowed to return to the green, pleasant and more temperate surroundings of Motuihe. On departing Ripa, Kircheiss left a small English inscription in their hut which summed up their emotions:

> *109 weary days held in this dreary place. 21/1–9/5 1918 Kircheiss Lieutenant z.See T. Deferon Artillerie & Navigazionsoffizier S.M.S Seeadler. We are fed up with this monotony and off we go to Motuihi. Thank God.*

Back at Motuihe they found the same old prisoners, but no Turner and no private launch. It was May 1918 and the war had six months left to run. From this idle spot on the other side of the world, von Luckner and Kircheiss were able to follow events as four years of senseless slaughter unravelled. The tide had been slowly, imperceptibly turning against the Germans, and they were approaching the endgame. The German High Command, aware that thousands of American troops would soon be entering the muddy battlefields of the Western Front, knew they had to do something, and launched a vicious spring offensive with the aim of overwhelming the similarly demoralised French and British troops. They used their best soldiers, stormtroopers, who initially made serious inroads, pushing the Western Front back 60 miles in places and getting to the point where Paris itself was just within shelling range. Yet here they faltered; they had outstripped their own supply lines and began to run out of weaponry, food and backup. By July they had ground to a

halt. Part of the problem was that the Germans were simply running out of bodies to line up in front of machine-gun fire. It was calculated that some 1.1 million men would be needed to maintain the offensive through 1919, and conscription was going to provide a mere 250,000 men who could potentially be massacred in the following year. The knowledge that the Americans were now pouring into the continent at a rate of 10,000 soldiers each day must have also been crippling. With the blockade also biting hard, you can understand how, in November 1918, with the promise of another winter of starvation and suffering just over the horizon, the Germans surrendered.

The final act was led by the Imperial Navy, by sailors cut from the same cloth as those who had served aboard the *Seeadler*. With defeat in sight, the High Seas Fleet planned to go out all guns blazing. Following the stalemate at Jutland, the vast majority of the German fleet had remained holed up in Kiel and Wilhelmshafen, impotent, restless and with increasingly disaffected crews. As the war ground slowly to a halt, the German Admiralty felt humiliated by its own ineffectiveness, and decided to take on the British fleet in one last desperate throw of the dice – a 'death ride', as one crew member recalled. However, it was clear, as the High Seas Fleet mustered in late October, that all was not well. Many crew members saw this move as little more than a human sacrifice. They all knew that negotiations for an armistice were underway, and the concept of this suicide run was abhorrent to them. Even if they broke down the hated blockade and inflicted a huge naval defeat on the Grand Fleet, the German army was on the brink of surrender and many saw any conflict as futile. The operation was aborted and the battleships returned to Kiel, still undefeated, still impotent. It was here that the mutiny that played a decisive part in putting a full stop on the bloodiest war in the

history of mankind took place, with sailors instigating the mass rebellion against the German elite that would eventually lead to the Kaiser's abdication and the forming of the Weimar Republic.

Von Luckner would doubtless have been appalled at this breakdown in naval discipline, and there is no question he was devastated by Germany's defeat. Yet it did mean that he could finally go home, although this would not happen until May 1919. As ever, he carried himself with the utmost dignity as he departed, accepting a bunch of flowers from a female admirer and generally bringing his own brand of decorum to the unruly scene, as this newspaper report from the time illustrates:

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## VON LUCKNER GOES HOME
## LANDING AT ROTTERDAM
## CONTRAST IN DEMEANOUR

Details of the final stages of the repatriation of the German and Austrian prisoners of war who were interned for many months on Motuihi [*sic*] Island, and who sailed from Wellington under guard on the *Willochra* late last May, have been recounted by a member of the guard who has just returned from abroad. The most prominent members of the party were Count Felix von Luckner, ex-commander of the raider *Seeadler*, Lieutenant Kircheiss, of the same vessel, and Dr. Schultz, ex-Governor of Samoa. The party, which consisted of some 150 interned aliens when it left Auckland, was joined by other internees at Sydney, bringing the total number of passengers aboard the *Willochra* to about 900. The monotony of the long voyage home was broken principally by very frequent concerts by the members of

> the string band, well known in Auckland streets in pre-war days. The greater portion of the music at these concerts was composed by the conductor himself, a German named Moray. Of the other items it is interesting to note that they were not all taken from operas composed in the Fatherland. On July 18 the *Willochra* drew up off Dover, and after having taken aboard a representative of the Navy, ran straight across to Rotterdam.[4]

Before sunrise the following day, the vessel steamed alongside the quiet quay. The spot on which the prisoners were to land had been fenced off, and a few military officials only were to be seen… Aboard the ship a general spirit of excitement and bustle prevailed, and it was noticeable that the Germans, with their accustomed eye to things material, literally 'bought out' the ship's canteen of all its foodstuffs. The relations between the first-class passengers and the ship's officers were not at all strained, and von Luckner was often heard to remark, 'You have not won the war; it was a draw.' Among the second-class passengers, however, the feeling was not so kindly. This was exemplified in the manner in which they rushed the gangway as soon as it was lowered, and accompanied their first moments of freedom with hoots and angry cries, directed at the ship's officers.

Count von Luckner remained courteous to the end. He was the last to leave the ship. That morning he had discarded his naval uniform and donned a new grey tweed suit. At the foot of the gangway he stopped, and took his leave of the officers, shaking hands with Major Blackett, the officer commanding the ship, and then passed down to the end of the quay. A few hours later, the *Willochra* swung clear from her anchorage,

and, almost simultaneously, a troop train steamed out towards the west, to the accompaniment of guttural hoots and cries from a few men returning to the inglorious rule of their beaten country. Even at that moment, thousands of Allied troops were threading the streets of London in the triumphal victory march of 19 July.

The adventure was over, and von Luckner returned to a fatherland that had been disfigured by four years of death, violence, hardship and suffering. The rest of *Seeadler*'s crew were released from their internment in Chile on 1 May 1919, and repatriated – with the exception of Kling, who remained in Chile until 1920, seeking to 'start a new future'. He did not return to Germany until the 1930s.

All the crew received the Iron Cross for their actions and all stuck to von Luckner's tall tale about the *Seeadler* being destroyed by a tidal wave. Pries, despite Kling's recommendation that he be court-martialled for inciting mutiny, was among those honoured. The only man who never returned to Germany was Dr Pietsch. According to von Luckner, 'the news of Germany's collapse reached the remote part of Chile where he was living. When he heard it, he fell dead of heart failure.' One can't help but suspect that a life of dissipation and endless cigars may have also played its part.

As for the *Seeadler*, she left her bones on Mopelia. In September 1917, HMAS *Encounter* was sent to Mopelia just to confirm that the raider was indeed out of action once and for all. The *Encounter*'s crew boarded her and photographs of her charred and mangled deck confirmed that rumours of her demise were far from exaggerated. The celebrity of the old vessel was already growing and the men of the *Encounter* determined to cut off her figurehead, which is now on show at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, many miles from the open ocean to which it spent the first

40 years of its existence bowing and nodding. Today, the remainder of the last sailing corsair lies gently rusting five fathoms deep off the limpid waters of Mopelia. A coral atoll in the South Seas is an unlikely resting place for a big British windjammer, yet this outlandish spot is a fitting grave for one of the most absurd and romantic relics of a war so singularly lacking in the latter quality.

# EPILOGUE: A PAWN IN THE GAME

This should be the end of the tale but, inevitably, von Luckner had a couple of extras to add that are so dramatic and poetic in turn that it would almost be rude to leave them out.

Given von Luckner's evident pride in his country, his return to Germany must have been traumatic, for he returned to a land shattered by defeat. The final humiliation had come shortly before von Luckner's return and it doubtless marked him deeply, for it concerned him and everything he held most dear about his country. The High Seas Fleet had already played a key part in bringing about the end of the war through the mutinous actions of crews and this doubtless pained von Luckner. Yet the fleet remained undefeated, and, following the cessation of hostilities, this fearful force had been escorted to Scapa Flow and interned at the Royal Navy's base while the question of what to do with this lethal weapon of war was debated. Many of the German officers and crew remained aboard and, somewhat understandably, sank into a deep trough of depression, exacerbated by poor provisions and a general breakdown in naval discipline.

Meanwhile, the Allies argued over the fate of this mighty fleet. It was a genuine conundrum – the modern equivalent would be inheriting the entire nuclear armoury of Russia or America and having to decide what

on earth to do with it. Understandably the British – firmly established as the dominant naval force – advocated its destruction, while the French and Italians wanted the vessels shared out among the victors. Nothing could be formally decided until the Treaty of Versailles was signed. This eventually took place on 28 June 1919, but by then, the issue over warships had been resolved: Rear Admiral von Reuter, who was nominally in charge of the fleet, had taken matters into his own hands.

Von Reuter had managed to coordinate all the other captains to scuttle their ships simultaneously. On 21 June, at 10am, von Reuter hoisted a flag from his battleship, *Friedrich der Grosse*, ordering the sea cocks to be opened on all ships. It was a final blow upon a bruise, and a self-inflicted wound that summed up the frustrating impotence of the war at sea. For two hours, the entire German Imperial Navy sat at anchor, slowly filling with water, until, at midday, von Reuter's own *Friedrich der Grosse* betrayed the fleet's secret, listing over heavily. The British, alerted to von Reuter's duplicity, set about trying to rescue what they could by beaching vessels that were still afloat. German sailors, by now fleeing their stricken vessels in the lifeboats, were also fired upon, claiming nine lives.

By 5pm, the *Hindenburg*, the last German battleship afloat, took her final death plunge and all was eerily peaceful. The beached ships, some ugly gouts of oil, and the superstructures of some of the warships peeking above the water's surface were all that betrayed the fact that, five hours previously, one of the most advanced and dangerous naval fleets ever to be assembled – representing millions of pounds' worth of German taxpayers' money – had been lying there at anchor.

Of the 74-strong fleet, 52 had been sunk. The nine men who perished were the final casualties of the Great War, and the nature of their deaths

and the manner in which the Imperial Fleet had been destroyed seemed to sum up the futility of the entire conflict.

Von Luckner never commented on this final act of defiance by the German Navy. It is possible that he shared the view of German Admiral Reinhardt Scheer, who stated, 'I rejoice. The stain of surrender has been wiped from the escutcheon of the German Fleet. The sinking of these ships has proved that the spirit of the fleet is not dead. This last act is true to the best traditions of the German Navy.'[1]

Whatever the count's views were, he, like his beloved navy, now had a clean slate to work from. In common with many men returning from war in a state of utter confusion and disorientation after many years away, he promptly divorced his wife, with whom he had a daughter, and set about dusting himself off and starting again. He soon discovered that his heroics with the *Seeadler* had not gone unnoticed, and the shattered remnant of the German Admiralty was keen to give von Luckner the credit he was due. To a humiliated nation clutching at any scrap of glory capable of restoring a sense of dignity, von Luckner was a powerful poster boy. Fittingly, he was given command of a rather dilapidated sail training vessel, which he named *Niobe*. With the navy in tatters and the new Weimar Republic on the verge of collapse, von Luckner had to beg, steal and borrow to keep his vessel operational, but she kept him in gainful employment while his fame spread.

The *Seeadler*'s crew was reunited in 1920 in order to receive the Iron Cross. Doubtless the desperation for a good news story within Germany meant that von Luckner's tall tale regarding the tidal wave that destroyed the *Seeadler* and Kling's protestations that Pries deserved a court martial were both conveniently ignored. Yet, while the rest of the *Seeadler*'s crew disappeared from the limelight, a new chapter was opening up for von Luckner. He was, first and foremost, a showman, and his larger-than-life

personality made him an ideal focal point for a nation trying to forge a new sense of national pride. He began to give talks and was surprised at the vast number of people who turned up.

The next step was to write up his memoirs of the voyage – which were published in *Seeteufel, Abenteuer aus meinem Leben* (Sea Devil, Adventure of my Life). The book, replete with a handful of embellishments and poetic flourishes, was a big hit in Germany, and von Luckner was well on the way to becoming a celebrity. It helped that he had by then married Ingeborg von Egestrom, who came from a wealthy Swedish family and was a glamorous figure. In 1922 he opted to step down as commander of the *Niobe* and threw himself fully into the world of fame.

Von Luckner's big break came when he met the American journalist and adventurer Lowell Thomas. Thomas's own career was on the up when he met von Luckner in 1925. He had already made a name for himself reporting on T E Lawrence's own rather spectacular adventures in the Middle East. Thomas had actually been part of Lawrence's entourage and subsequently played an important role in publicising his remarkable adventures. He also evidently had an eye for a good story, and, following a chance encounter with von Luckner at an airfield, he seized upon the remarkable tale of the *Seeadler* and persuaded the old sailor to help him write a new account of the voyage specifically for an American audience. The result was simply entitled *The Sea Devil* and was an immediate hit.

What helped this recipe for success was that von Luckner was more than willing to indulge in lengthy flights of fancy within the text, while Thomas was unquestionably a reporter who stuck to the old adage that a journalist should never let the truth get in the way of a good story. The text is largely translated from von Luckner's own account of the voyage, which had already promulgated certain untruths and half truths. In the

hands of Thomas, doubtless encouraged by von Luckner, the story of the *Seeadler* often slips dangerously into the realm of fiction. The *Seeadler* is no longer a Glasgow-built windjammer, but becomes an American clipper, one of the fleetest sailing vessels to sail the seas.

There are all sorts of other little flourishes in the narrative, such as von Luckner's emotional visit to the *Pinmore*, combined with misspellings of ships' names and captains' names that have tended to bamboozle anyone subsequently searching for the truth. It doesn't help that often the truth is just as strange as the fiction, making it at times almost impossible to know where one starts and the other ends. In this matter, it is perhaps fair to excuse von Luckner for his hyperbole to some extent. He was a showman and a fantasist, but also a man who was capable of instigating real-life, far-fetched adventures. It must also be remembered that, in a post-war Germany dogged by hyperinflation and economic meltdown, he must have often looked into the abyss financially, and if salvation could be achieved with the help of a few white lies, then he evidently felt this was a price worth paying.

Things were going well for von Luckner, and his next move was to purchase a big four-masted schooner, the *Vaterland*, which he fitted out with the plan of going on a sort of goodwill tour of the world. It was precisely the sort of move that the beleaguered German nation required, and the government was even willing to stump up some extra funds for the trip. His primary target was always America, and the *Vaterland* arrived there on 22 October 1926. He was an instant success; he was a great showman and was more than capable of entertaining the crowds who attended his lectures in spectacular style: one of his party tricks was to demonstrate his great strength by tearing a telephone book in half on stage.

There are still a surprisingly large number of signed von Luckner postcards in circulation even today, testament to his aptitude as a self-publicist. In the course of his trip, he was given a motor car by Henry Ford, was made an honorary citizen of the United States, and was also offered an audience with the President, Calvin Coolidge, which he declined on the advice of his own government. At some point, von Luckner renamed the *Vaterland* '*Mopelia*' and embarked on something of a debauch through the Caribbean with his chum Lowell Thomas, among others. By April 1928 he was back in Germany. It is rather surprising that he did not choose to carry on into the Pacific and some of his old haunts there, but perhaps he felt that, since the main aim of his trip had been such an outstanding success, it was time to quit while he was ahead.

He returned to a Germany that was once more on the brink of seismic changes and immediately endured one himself for, shortly after returning, the *Mopelia* caught fire in dock and burned to the water's edge. Fortunately no one was aboard, although for a time it was assumed the count had died in the fire, and he had the pleasure of reading his own obituary, which was published across the world.

Von Luckner put a brave face on his misfortune, but it meant that, once more, he was adrift without a ship. Undeterred, he continued with his lecturing and tours, writing more books with the help of Lowell Thomas and generally consolidating his position as a celebrity and all-round goodwill ambassador for Germany. It was this de facto role that landed von Luckner in more hot water following the rise of the Nazi party. Hitler and his cohorts were quick to see that this charismatic character had the potential to work as part of their propaganda machine and, as a result, the affable von Luckner embarked on the most controversial chapter and voyage of his life.

It is very doubtful that von Luckner was ever particularly sympathetic to the Nazis. He was a Freemason, and membership of this organisation barred him from membership of the party, and he never showed any interest in changing this state of affairs – or in rescinding his honorary citizenship of the United States, for that matter. Yet there is little question that in the 1930s, in common with the vast majority of German citizens, he was taken with certain aspects of what Herr Hitler and his cohorts were doing. In common with most citizens, the spectacle of his proud country brought to its knees had not been an edifying one for him, and reassertion of German pride and military might – not to mention economic strength – was something he welcomed. It was probably this undercurrent of hope that meant that when he was approached by the Nazi party to fit out a new vessel and head out on another goodwill mission overseas, he agreed willingly enough. It would be no repeat of the *Vaterland*, however. This time he would be an emissary for the Nazi party. The year was 1937 and, with dark clouds once again gathering over Europe, he was heading into a perfect storm.

The deal meant that the Nazis provided the funds for a new vessel. Indeed, Goebbels, writing in 1938, stated, 'Von Luckner's voyage was at the time to a large extent supported conceptually and financially by me.'[2] The result was the *Seeteufel*, a smart schooner 88 feet long and beautifully fitted out. She carried seven crew, one of whom was unquestionably in the pay of the Gestapo – although von Luckner was not aware of this fact. The tour, which, at least superficially, was framed as a 'pleasure' cruise, was to take in America and, this time, thread the Panama Canal before heading down through the South Seas to New Zealand by way of Australia.

In retrospect, there can have been few men less suited to being an emissary of the Nazi party. Von Luckner was never a man to follow the herd. He was always verbose and outspoken; a sustained period of toeing a party line was always going to be a big ask for a man who, doubtless, did not fully agree with everything Herr Hitler was doing, and who had a previous pedigree in thinking for himself. To make matters worse, the Gestapo man, one Hans Oesterreich, was responsible for reporting back directly to the Nazis on von Luckner's conduct. The count was playing with fire. Put one foot wrong and he was going to get severely burnt. In America, he just about got away with it, thanks to his residual popularity there. From here, it was a case of heading through the Panama Canal and on into the South Seas. This gave von Luckner the chance to return to Mopelia. Weather conditions meant that the decision was taken not to land, but all aboard had the chance to view the shattered hull of the *Seeadler* before they put the island to their rudder. It would be the last time von Luckner ever saw his old ship.

A stop in Australia was marked by a frosty reception and protests, and by the time he reached New Zealand in February 1938, he was in serious trouble. He remained a legend in New Zealand thanks to his by now almost mythical escape from Motuihe, but his return came at a time when Hitler was busy annexing Austria and the first Kindertransport trains were rolling into London. This meant that it was difficult for anyone to give the count a genuinely warm welcome, particularly when his own motives for being there were questionable. Was he a German spy? Despite von Luckner's frequent protestations that he was nothing but a simple sailor making a sentimental return to his old haunts, something didn't add up and his visits to Australia and New Zealand were both

dogged by demonstrations and suspicion. This report in the *New Zealand Herald* gives a flavour of the mood:

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## HOSTILE CROWDS VON LUCKNER BOOED LECTURE SERIES RUINED AGITATORS IN MINORITY

Count Felix von Luckner's stay in Sydney has been marked by incidents which have resulted from demonstrations by agitators, who ruined the financial prospects of his public lectures. These agitators are a mere handful, but they have succeeded in besmirching the reputation Australians have for fairness and hospitality to a foreign visitor.

The demonstrators twice waited outside a broadcasting station for the man they have described as a 'Nazi spy and political agent,' but, on each occasion, with the help of officials, von Luckner eluded them. Then a series of public lectures was announced. Two at Canberra were 'frosts.' One was cancelled because no one attended, and at the other only about 70 persons listened to the Count's narrative of his adventures and career.

The first Sydney lecture was set down for last Monday evening, in the Town Hall. Only about 400 persons were present, and it soon became obvious that about 50 of these were there to stop the lecture.

### Disorderly Sydney Gathering

When the Count appeared, he was greeted by boos and shouts of 'Fascist spy!' 'Down with Hitler!' and 'Murderer!'

Von Luckner's manager, Captain R. Chapman, appealed in vain for silence. The Count began to speak hesitantly, but his words were drowned by concerted hooting. One man leapt to his feet and shouted 'Down with von Luckner, the Nazi spy!' and was removed by detectives.

Smiling broadly, von Luckner stood by the microphone as his manager attempted to argue with the demonstrators. Calls came from all parts of the gallery. 'What about the women and children in Spain?' a woman shouted as von Luckner again began his lecture. He could be heard only with difficulty above the jeering and hooting. Plainclothes policemen took up positions among the groups of demonstrators, and each time a man rose to his feet to shout at von Luckner he was grasped by two officers and hurried out of the hall.

**Removal of Interjectors**

Amid comparative quiet, von Luckner continued his lecture. His statement, 'I don't know anything about politics,' was greeted with boos and a renewal of shouted interjections, and three men were removed.

At this stage a man in the body of the hall stood up and, addressing von Luckner, said, 'I hope you will not take any notice of this, sir. These are young people who do not know any better.' In the disturbance which followed, several more interjectors were removed. Half an hour after the lecture began there was still disorder. More police were sent into the gallery, and three more men were removed, one struggling

violently. A woman who attracted considerable attention by shrieking imprecations was also removed.

**Appeal for a fair hearing**

For the first time von Luckner showed signs of anger. 'Give me a fair hearing as a sailor,' he pleaded. 'If you must make a noise, wait till I have spoken. This is not what you call sporting.' A man at the back of the hall jumped forward to the edge of the stage, and asked as a limbless soldier for a fair hearing for von Luckner. 'These people who are making this uproar are the first to ask for free speech always,' he said. 'I hope you do not think they represent the people of Australia.' Another banner 'Hitlerism is mass murder of women and children' was quickly wrested from the grasp of two men, who were ejected. The leading demonstrators were by that time outside the hall, and there were only isolated interjections. The Count's lecture was then listened to quietly. As a result of this demonstration, Count von Luckner cancelled arrangements for other lectures in Sydney and other capital cities.[3]

If the lecturing was disastrous, the voyage itself does not appear to have been a happy one either. Von Luckner had always been a disciplinarian with a very strong view on rank when afloat. While this might have worked reasonably well aboard a naval vessel like the *Seeadler*, it was less successful when translated to a small yacht with a tight-knit crew. Crew members later complained about the unequal distribution of stores, which led to discontent.

Then there was the Gestapo agent, Oesterreich, who evidently fell out with von Luckner in a big way and later reported being punched to the floor by the count – who quite evidently did not suspect Oesterreich's true role aboard, but also clearly disliked him. As it was, the incident was further grist to the mill for the Gestapo man, who was compiling a dossier on von Luckner that did not promise to win the latter any friends within the Nazi party.

It didn't help that von Luckner had ordered the Nazi propaganda literature to be tossed overboard long before the *Seeteufel* even reached the Pacific. Oesterreich also stated that the count frequently spent hours pontificating on his own adventures while failing to extol the virtues of National Socialism. Even worse, he made some highly publicised comments about Stalin, calling him a 'just a fool', and suggested Australia should return New Guinea to the Germans to act as a bulwark against the Japanese. Given that Hitler was courting the favour of both Russia and Japan as potential allies, the comments were unwise at best.

By the time von Luckner arrived back in Germany, he discovered that Oesterreich had been busy and that Goebbels, who had initially tried to defend von Luckner, had lost patience. He was summoned before a Court of Honour and began to see precisely what a witch hunt was. He also got a taste of Nazi justice. In the past, von Luckner had used his mix of charm, charisma and bluster to get out of all manner of scrapes. That was never going to wash with the Nazi party. He had treated the *Seeteufel* trip as a private pleasure cruise and now he was going to pay for it in full. There would be no humanity, no forgiving shrug.

During the trial, all manner of mud was slung at von Luckner, including the accusation that he had molested his own daughter. In the end, he

managed to escape serious punishment by promising to remain silent and essentially disappear from public life. His assets were frozen and sales of his book were suspended. He retired to Halle to lick his wounds under little more than house arrest. He was lucky to escape with his life, and, doubtless, any lingering respect he had for the work of Herr Hitler and National Socialism evaporated pretty rapidly.

Unbelievably, however, there were still a few final flourishes to von Luckner's story. The first came during a rare visit to Berlin during his period of what was, by and large, internment. In 1943, von Luckner had obtained permission to visit Berlin – probably to visit old friends. As he wandered along the streets he must have been shocked at the sheer level of destruction. His own city, Halle, had remarkably been overlooked by the RAF, despite being the tenth-largest city in Germany, so this was an eye-opener.

As von Luckner walked past one bombed-out house, he chanced to pick up the passport of one of the victims of the attack, Frieda Schafer, and pocketed it. It must have been a surreal day, even by von Luckner's standards, because, shortly after this, he encountered a young girl, Rose Jansen, who was sobbing uncontrollably. For unknown reasons, she approached von Luckner and informed him that she was a Jew, that her family had all been transported to Auschwitz, and that she herself was being hunted by the SS. By sheer luck, von Luckner still carried the passport of Frieda Schafer. He gave this to Rose and pointed her in the direction of a friend of his who he knew could provide her with shelter. After this, he continued on his way, apparently thinking nothing more of the incident. It sounds like another of von Luckner's tall stories, yet, years later, Rose Jansen confirmed that von Luckner had saved her life.

His final act to make its way into the history books was his significant role in the saving of his own home town, Halle, from destruction. As the war drew to a close, the Allies advanced across Germany. Hitler's orders were to fight for Germany street by street, and this meant that stiff resistance was often encountered in the cities. By 14 April, an American unit known as the Timberwolves was approaching Halle and facing particularly staunch defence from a group of German soldiers holed up there. Up until this point, the city had emerged largely unscathed, apart from a couple of bombing raids. Yet, as the Timberwolves were rebuffed, things began to look seriously bleak for Halle. General Terry Allen led the Timberwolves and he was in no mood to take any nonsense after a campaign that had seen his unit battle its way across half of Germany. He also had nearly 1,000 bombers and fighter planes at his disposal and was aware that a spot of carpet bombing would do a great deal to subdue any resistance in the city.

Meanwhile, within Halle, von Luckner, his mother and his wife all sat awaiting their fate. Given his experience at the hands of the Nazis, von Luckner must have welcomed the arrival of the Americans, whom he had always viewed as his friends. Yet he must have been deeply apprehensive about what would pass before the city finally capitulated. Death seemed near at hand. Then, remarkably, he spotted a familiar American face scurrying covertly down an alley. It was a journalist by the name of Al Newman whom he knew from his days on the lecture circuit in America.

Newman was working as a war correspondent. He had remembered that von Luckner lived in Halle, and managed to convince General Allen that it was worth having a stab at finding von Luckner to persuade him to broker a peace deal. Somehow, against the odds, he had managed

to find him, and von Luckner was smuggled out of the city to meet with General Allen. The general soon made it clear just how hopeless the German position was, and precisely how much death and destruction would befall the city if it did not surrender.

Von Luckner returned to Halle and reported the situation to the German commander leading the rearguard action. It was a tremendous risk on the part of von Luckner and an act of great trust by General Allen. Yet the gamble at least partially paid off, for, although the German commander would not surrender, he did agree to establish 'safe zones' around the extensive military hospitals, and essentially engineered a situation whereby his troops could beat a retreat out of Halle before the city was bombed out of existence.

The city was spared, thanks, in no small part, to von Luckner. Oddly, his legacy in Halle is mixed, with many viewing him as having betrayed the city. Perhaps it didn't help that, shortly after this surrender, the city was occupied by the Red Army and fell behind the Iron Curtain. The consequence of Russian occupation for von Luckner was that, once more, he was *persona non grata*. His books were once again banned as he was viewed as the unacceptable face of old German imperialism.

Von Luckner retreated to his wife's native Sweden and finally died in 1966 at the ripe old age of 85. Following his death, he was given a full military send-off, and his remarkable life was celebrated once more.

Felix von Luckner was a far from perfect human being, and he was certainly a man full of contradictions: the naval officer who performed more practical acts of pacifism than almost any other; the patriot who welcomed the American invasion of his country; the fantasist whose tall tales came true. He was no paragon of virtue and there are plenty of eye-witness reports of his numerous failings, but the more you read about him,

the more you sense that, deep within, there lurked a decent person with a heart. Von Luckner was a man shaped in part by, and often tormented by, war and its consequences. Yet he never lost sight of his own basic humanity, or of the fact that another man's life was worth more than any nationalistic principle – the fact that war's manufactured hatred was ultimately nonsense. Above all else, he deserves to be remembered for that.

# A NOTE ON THE TEXT

Because of the unique manner in which von Luckner's many tales were recounted – both by himself and by Lowell Thomas – it is often incredibly difficult to discern fact from fiction. Generally, a little research helps to tease out the truth: contemporary newspaper reports on the *Pinmore*'s passage between San Francisco and Queenstown rapidly disproved von Luckner's mythical 285-day passage. In other cases, however, it is very difficult to establish precisely what happened. A good example is the case of fair Josefeena, the young sailor who allegedly dressed as a woman in order to help dupe the officers of the *Patia* when they boarded the *Seeadler* in the Atlantic. There is no mention of Josefeena in the *Seeadler*'s official war diary, so some have therefore argued that she was just another of von Luckner's tall tales. Yet there is a photograph of von Luckner aboard the *Seeadler* with Josefeena, so I felt that common sense dictated that she must have existed. This is the approach I have taken on any of the slightly moot points throughout the book. I have also used contemporary newspaper reports as frequently as possible, since they were published before von Luckner and Lowell Thomas could distort the truth. Despite an inevitable bias towards the Allied cause, they remain surprisingly positive about von Luckner, even in the heat of conflict.

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5 Schenk, Hans, *Graf Buckner's Seeadler: Das Krigenstagebuch einer berühmten Kaperfahrt* (Hamburg: Carlen Verlag, 1999), p.153

6 *Houston Daily Post*, 13 December, 1917

7 *Ibid*

8 *Tacoma Times*, 18 December 1917

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1 Loveridge, Stephen, *New Zealand Journal of History*. 'A German is Always a German? Representations of Enemies, Germans and Race in New Zealand c.1890-1918' (University of Auckland, 2014), vol. 48, no. 1, p.69

2 Boyack, Nicholas & Tolerton, Jane, *In the Shadow of War: New Zealand Soldiers Talk about the War and Their Lives* (Penguin, 1990), p.171

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1 Bade, James, *Von Luckner: A Reassessment* (Peter Lang, 2004) p.64

2 *Ibid*, p.66

3 *New Zealand Truth*, 22 December 1917

4 Von Luckner, Felix, *Seeteufel: Abenteuer aus meinem Leben* (Leipzig: K F Koehler, 1923), p.219

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6 *Bruce Herald*, 24 December 1917

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1 *Auckland Star*, 29 December 1917

2 *Hastings Standard*, 19 December 1917

3 *Southland Times*, 29 December 1917

4 *Auckland Star*, 29 December 1917

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1 *Samoanische Zeitung*, 15 December 1917

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1 Bade, James, *Von Luckner: A Reassessment* (Peter Lang, 2004) p.72

2 *Ibid*, p.73

3 *Ibid*, p.73

4 *New Zealand Herald*, 8 December 1919

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1 Massie, Robert, *Castles of Steel: Britain, Germany and the Winning of the Great War at Sea* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2004), p.778

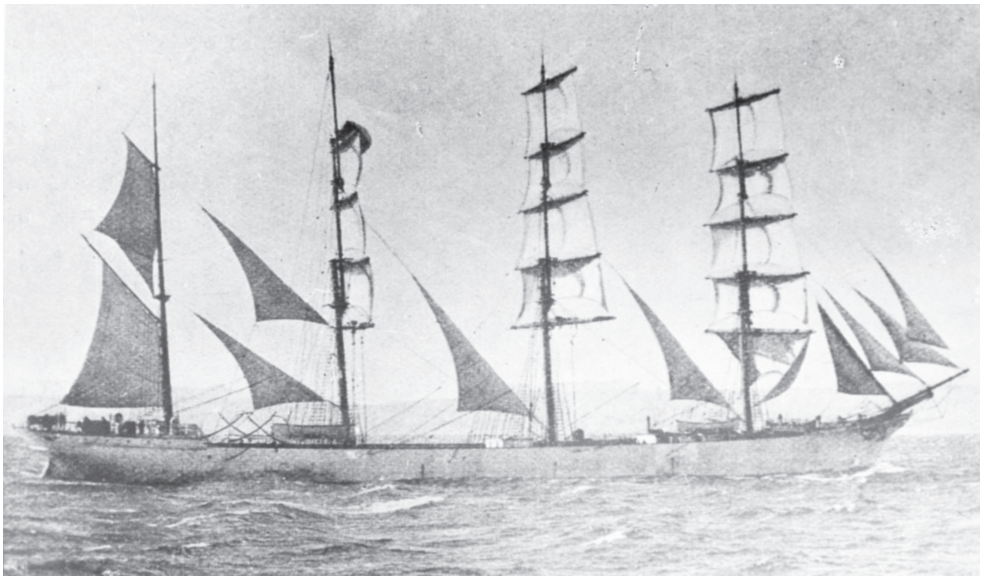
2 Bade, James, *Von Luckner: A Reassessment* (Peter Lang, 2004) p.142

3 *New Zealand Herald*, 9 June 1938

Felix von Luckner before departing on his epic voyage on the *Seeadler*, looking every inch the dashing young officer.

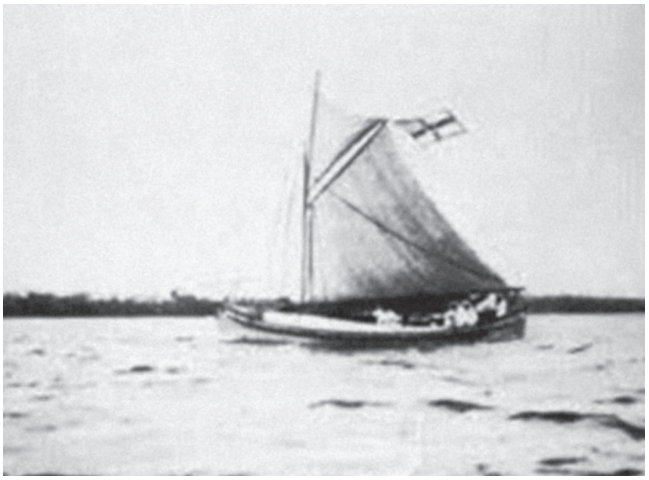
The *Seeadler* in her previous incarnation as the *Pass of Balmaha*. The removal of her upper or royal yards (a money-saving measure) gave her spars a somewhat foreshortened look.

The *Seeadler* pursuing one of her many quarries in the Atlantic.



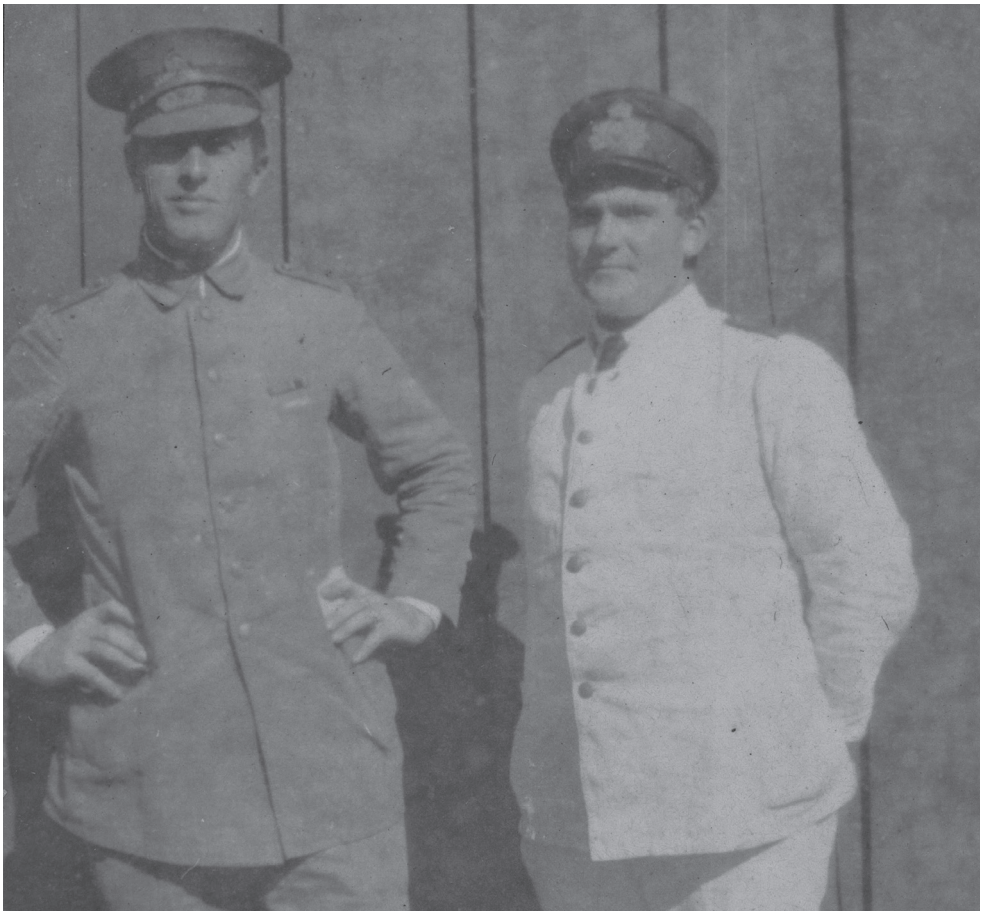
The *Pinmore*, one of the *Seeadler*'s numerous victims, had a fine reputation for speed. Von Luckner claimed to have served aboard her many years before her eventual capture at his hands.

The *Seeadler* in her final resting place.

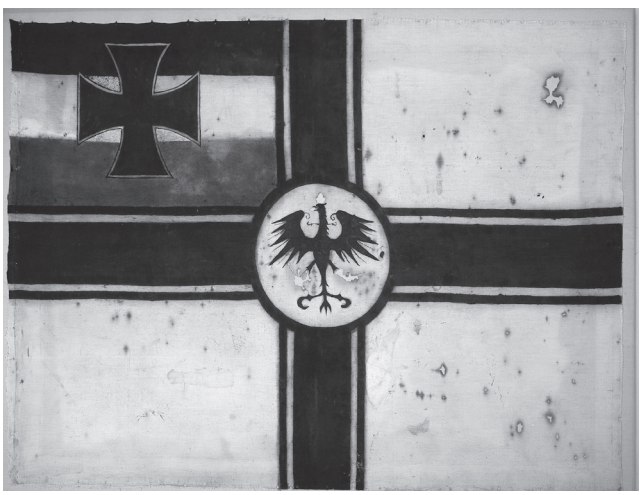


The *Kronprinzessin Cecilie*, the 18' open boat on which von Luckner and five of his crew sailed 2,500 miles across the Pacific.

Von Luckner and Kircheiss during their internment on Motuihe Island, New Zealand. They were deeply involved in plans to escape.



Von Luckner and Kircheiss remained together throughout their imprisonment in New Zealand. Interned principally on Motuihe, they also endured several weeks on Ripa Island in Lyttelton Harbour, South Island. Neither enjoyed the change of climate.



The German Imperial Navy flag created specially for the prisoners' escape. It was made out of flour sacks.

Felix von Luckner aboard the *Pearl*, the same motor launch that he would later use to escape Motuihe.

The *Moa*, which was seized by the escape party from Motuihe. A type of boat known in New Zealand as a scow, she was specially designed for the New Zealand coastal trade.

Captured off the Kermadec Islands, the *Moa* hove-to and the crew awaited their fate.

The *Moa* alongside her captor, the *Iris*.

The escapees row towards the *Iris* as they prepare to surrender.

Aboard the *Iris* after his surrender, Von Luckner must have been tormented by the knowledge that he had come so agonisingly close to escape.